

# Interdisciplinary Research on Space and Power: An Introduction and Critical Reflection.

Michael Laiho, Thomas Spray

Durham University, UK

Correspondence: [m.j.laiho@durham.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.laiho@durham.ac.uk), [t.e.spray@durham.ac.uk](mailto:t.e.spray@durham.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

*In this introductory article, the authors discuss the topic of social constructions of space by deconstructing what are widely referred to in academic studies as hegemonic narratives. In order to introduce a collection of articles critically, however, the authors pay special attention to the ways in which academic studies have traditionally historicised cultural, political and geographical spaces and have therefore played a role in spatial interpretations of nationalism, sovereignty, and territory. References to research findings and observations presented by an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars during a symposium held at Durham University's Institute for Advanced Studies provide the context for this article. To this end, the authors expand the scope of three of these presentations - comprising a collection of articles exploring nationalism, sovereignty, and territory - and extract common research findings before proceeding to engage more critically with questions about how the various participating disciplines understand space in the context of knowledge and power. The authors conclude that hegemonic narratives relate to individual past, present, and future contexts, as well as to the ways in which academics, politicians, and the wider public interpret them. In conclusion, the authors demonstrate how the relationship between knowledge about space on one hand, and power to construct or interpret space(s) on the other, provides ample opportunity for discussion across disciplines.*

Keywords: interdisciplinary research; narratives; space; power.

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## **Introduction**

Academic studies focusing on a range of geographical spaces are typically contextualised within a specific timeframe, and to onlookers from various disciplines it became apparent over the course of 2016 that the year had the potential to prove significant for research seeking to re-establish critical questions concerning nationalism, sovereignty, and territory. Whether concerning the United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum (popularly referred to as 'Brexit') on 23rd June and Britain's subsequent changing relationship with the European Union, Americans' vote for a return to a 'greater' United States in the 8th November presidential election, or mass media's increasing role in depicting perceived notions of uncontrollable immigration from war-torn regions in the Middle East, it seemed almost impossible to predict the outcome of contested political issues. Much of this uncertainty could be usefully considered as an inter-societal re-evaluation of common terminology: what does it mean to be a nation; who should decide on matters of sovereignty; to what extent are current territorial boundaries variable?

In this context, contemporary history presents a unique opportunity for critical reflection on the past, present, and future meanings of key socio-spatial narratives and the role they have played in shaping global politics. In December of 2016 the authors organised an interdisciplinary research symposium at the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS), Durham University, in order to confront and critically examine the concepts of nationalism, sovereignty, and territory, within the context of a variety of specific geographical spaces and time periods. This symposium was open to and advertised across a broad range of disciplines, departments, and institutions from around the UK, with participants being asked to consider some or all of the chosen thematic strands from their own unique research perspectives. Key to this consideration was the aforementioned notion of a timely need to re-assess popular and academic boundaries and definitions.

The following three articles emerge from this academic discussion held at Durham's IAS. By their nature they should appeal to readers from across a wide range of disciplinary boundaries. Since all of the academic presentations raised slightly different sets of questions, the aim of this introductory article is less to detract from the academic rigour of the originals by providing sweeping generalisations across all disciplines, but rather to identify relevant outcomes from the symposium's discussion in order to illustrate ways in which key questions are framed by authors from different academic disciplines. To this end, the article also considers the research findings of all those involved in the symposium, and not just the research represented by the following articles.

Additionally, in order to properly explore historical and philosophical dimensions of nationalism, sovereignty and territory across disciplines, the chosen articles are selected because they investigate past, present, and future representations of space: Matthew Quallen's article explores cultural tension expressed via scientific discourse among a political elite at the height of American nation-building in France and the United States during the eighteenth century; Susan Shay's article explores the advent of modern technologies of communication that are used by indigenous groups to subvert the hegemony of American sovereignty in Hawai'i; whereas Jack Coopey's article explains, rather ironically, that future use of Michel Foucault's writing by academics will enact sovereign control over the late author's ideas. Essentially, each article illustrates the ways in which people have influenced hegemonic narratives about space differently, either as politicians, learned academics, or grass-roots activists. By documenting this process across a selection of time periods and as implemented by a selection of elite groups one can appreciate the commonalities and variabilities involved.

When one comes to deconstruct popular modern scientific narratives about the physical world it is often possible to uncover prescribed political motives. In recent years this trend of thinking has been apparent in a number of fields, with one such example being depictions of Arctic space created by European elites, in which geographical spaces of untapped hydrocarbon reserves have been historically negotiated within the context of other environmental narratives such as peak oil and the Anthropocene (**Laiho, 2016**). Having the power to narrate the physical world through scientific paradigms and ideological tropes, such as 'sustainable development,' elites inadvertently humanise (or de-naturalise) space through government policies. In a less abstract sense of narration, one could regard the interests of elites as playing an influential role in how they organise their world, for instance in how others perceive the spatial extent of their sovereignty or their ongoing 'territorialisation' of space (**Elden, 2009**). At the level of governance, hegemonic narratives bring about historical conditions from which sovereignty and territory can emerge, while elites work together to influence the ordering of future space.

On the level of the individual thinker, the terms 'nation,' 'sovereignty,' and 'territory' can assimilate connotations of personal importance and self-made definitions. Jack Coopey's (**2016**) presentation titled 'The Ethics of Resistance: Sovereignty and Territory in Foucault's College de France lectures (1970-1984)' draws on the philosophical work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose personal achievements as a critical theorist have been appropriated by an academic elite to further their research interests. Coopey's article follows this vein of thought to provide a critical evaluation of scholarly appropriation of Foucault's concept of

'biopolitics,' for example. In doing so, he explores the limits of personal sovereignty in relation to hegemonic discourse of a epistemic elite, which demonstrates how scholars willingly and unwillingly participate in the governance of Foucault's ideas (**Foucault, 1997**). Therefore, the construction, reception, and external modification of one's personal sovereignty, being a result of one's perception of the world in relation to the hegemonic narratives of others, provides opportunity for a range of critical psychoanalytical and philosophical studies exploring space that observe the spatial 'affect' of the knowledge-power relationship (**Thrift, 2007**).

Narratives of popular belief and scientific discourse can have the tendency to become blurred, leading to the scientific label of truth being applied to popular conception or myth (**Barthes, 1973**). A case study which demonstrates one such confusion of narratives is provided by Matthew Quallen in his article 'Buffon and a Bull Moose: Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia and America's Wild Founding.' Quallen (**2016**) examines Jefferson's list of superbly large fauna - a list compiled in order to exhibit and promote an international scientific recognition of positive traits of American identity - written as a response to the Comte du Buffon's highly-influential *Histoire Naturelle*, which had suggested that the fauna and people of America would slowly degenerate over time due to the adverse conditions found there (**Leclerc, 1749-1789**). As Quallen explores, the repercussions of this creative process were wide reaching and at times deeply troubling, with the arguments and evidence for a scientific battle for genetic superiority spilling over into the such discussions as the rights of indigenous people and the validity of the slave trade. One could argue that in both cases of 'scientific treatise' in this instance the empirical truth of the research was of secondary importance to the affirmation or degradation of the perceived quality of America's territorial standing, and as such of the depiction of the nation as a whole. The perceived defining features of America's increasing sovereign territory were directly linked with salient genetic characteristics on a nationwide, cross-species level.

Whereas in Jefferson's time a scientific volume was the most effective method to counter potentially damaging foreign theories, in contemporary societies the challenges to hegemonic narratives about people and places are increasingly supported and contested through the development of modern science and technology. In Susan Shay's article on 'Indigenous Nationalism in the Age of the Internet,' the author analyses the historical significance of recent web developments within indigenous communities in Hawai'i as a means of challenging the 'foreign' sovereignty of the United States government. Through Shay's (**2016**) presentation, one recognises that a localised technological revolution has brought about dramatic changes to the way the islanders view themselves in the context

of their lived environment. The ability to converse with fellow Hawai'ians, governments and politically active networks sharing similar causes, as well as having access to unprecedented quantities of information via the web, has empowered indigenous communities in many ways. Historically, the internet has provided a digital space to form a collective union, which affords them both stronger protection from external governing pressures and the possibility to extend the influence of their indigenous identity far beyond the shores of their own land. Therefore, it would be recommendable to read Shay's contribution in the context of ongoing academic discussions regarding the potential of new social media to shape new hegemonic narratives (**Castells, 2009**).

Although the three articles explore different historical and social contexts, the authors provide a number of useful general observations regarding the ordering of space through social practice. Most commonly, the will to know (space) seems an important feature in society, and this phenomenon provides the social context for the dis-/empowerment of different groups as they seek to influence hegemonic narratives, such as those of nationalism, sovereignty, and territory (**Li, 2007**). In each of the authors' work, one notices similarities in their approach to unpacking the way nationalism, sovereignty and territory have been articulated by different elite groups over time. Very often, as the authors demonstrate, ideas and identities of an established elite group challenge or become challenged by opposing world views. In Shay's article this is demonstrated by the manner in which indigenous communities from around the world have been able to provide one another with a global context for their struggles against higher powers. In Quallen's article one can note this process across two separate elites, and the necessary adoption of a specific register and domain (in this case scientific discourse) in order to achieve this. The hypothetical 'red thread' connecting the articles is therefore an ambition to explore the relationship between knowledge about space in one instance and power to construct or interpret space(s) in another, which demonstrates a productive curiosity across academic disciplines. The next section of this article will focus more closely on similar convergences across disciplines by looking at the ways in which hegemonic narratives of nationalism, sovereignty, and territory relate to the past, present, and future societal contexts from which they emerge, as well as the ways in which academics, politicians and the wider public interpret them.

## **Deconstructing Nationalism, Sovereignty, and Territory: A Critical Reflection**

As part of a process attempting to understand how geographical spaces are understood, communicated and politicised in our contemporary world, symposium participants were asked to present and reflect on the origins of narratives that have shaped and continue to influence politics, the arts, science, religion, and popular thought. In more recent studies on globalisation, scholarship from a variety of disciplines has shed light on the ways that global trends have affected the ways in which geographical spaces are understood, performed, and shape social relations, such as within political science (**Baylis, 2011**), media studies (**Rantanen, 2005**), literary theory (**Said, 2003**), and human geography (**Massey, 2007**). The 'global' is therefore one narrative among many which informs the way that elites (a group historically comprising monarchs, politicians, scholars, and other skilled members of the public) make sense of their world and attempt to influence it.

The central arguments posited by the various papers of the symposium were intriguing in that they could readily be organised into a number of cross-disciplinary strands of investigation. These lines of investigation were chiefly composed of: (1) the dichotomy of external and internal influences on narratives about nationalism, sovereignty, and territory; (2) the process by which media – particularly in the realm of the arts – is both shaped by and shapes hegemonic narratives; (3) contact between different social groups within a common geographical space as both a challenge to and an affirmation of the defining qualities of nationalism, sovereignty, and territory; (4) the definition and construction of nationalism, sovereignty or territory by a select group of elite individuals – often academics, politicians, or community leaders from the spheres of science or religion; and (5) concepts of nationhood, sovereignty, and territory being intrinsically assimilated into governmental practice and even into our everyday understanding of the world. What is strikingly apparent about these propositions is that they were each adopted and expanded during the course of the symposium by several speakers without prior collaboration or instruction. From the broader sub-category of the Arts and Humanities one can easily trace a process over the last fifty years in which these key questions and ideas have moved to the forefront of academic understanding of nations, sovereignty, and territory.

Indigenous identity and the identity of contested regions formed a central part of the symposium's discussion. Historical research on the role of British nationalism in the context of Australian citizenship, particularly during the 1950s-1970s when nationalism was being 're-defined' by political elites, suggested that this process was as much brought about by

external political events as it was by Australian ones (**Mann, 2016**). Moreover, a careful reading of the recent election results in the USA and Britain's EU referendum suggested that similar voting patterns could be seen in areas with lower proportions of immigrants, with regards to anti-immigration sentiments, when compared to areas which failed to support indigenous rights during Australian constitutional reform. As times of political crises, the disparity between the rights of indigenous' peoples and rights of immigrants reflects a skewed sense of national identity, whereby 'founding' settlers influence the rules of discourse that override other narratives (**Huntingdon, 2004**). When exploring indigenous identity under hegemonic conditions of colonial power, one witnesses parallel sovereignties that emerge from distinct ethnic and gendered geographies. Due to the ways in which intermarriage between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia and Canada was viewed, namely as both a threat to sovereignty and a catalyst for its renegotiation, sovereignty was often informally established among different social groups (**McGrath, 2016**). Conservative notions of sovereignty found in international relations scholarship, for instance, which were established on the premise of omnipotent rule by Kings or Queens, are increasingly challenged by narratives about race, gender or matrimonial relations because they undermine any homogenous conceptualisation of sovereignty (for a critical history of sovereignty compare **Hobbes, 2008**, with **Balfour, 1997**). Hegemonic narratives of nationalism and sovereignty can ultimately become deconstructed by historical photos, letters, memoirs, and newspapers in order to highlight alternative histories, religions, and genders. That these divergent narratives appeared at times of social change could have either the effect of highlighting one particular issue or drowning it in a body of other concerns.

This concept is clearly related to another repeated theme of the symposium, which was the exploration of conflicting narratives about nationalism, narratives which have often led to the politicisation of sovereignty and territory during periods of civil or military unrest: a phenomenon highlighted, for example, by the recently-televised accounts of the violent nineteenth-century border disputes across northern Europe emerging from a mythology of the people, a literary construction informing foreign policy and internal identity politics (**Buk-Swienty, 2015**). It follows that studies of cultural and literary narratives about national identity can shed light on how elites use language and literature to imagine sovereign territories (**Lönnroth, 1998**; a recent example is provided by **Lee and McLelland, 2012**). The governmental techniques employed by elites can vary widely, which impacts the size of territorial space differently. At the height of the heyday of comparative philology in the nineteenth century, for example, a cultural elite largely made up of historians and

linguists could and did rewrite the perceived ownership of entire countries, counties, and regions, changing the nationality of populations with a single text (**Spray, 2016**). Language communities on the one hand could find themselves at odds with territorial-based communities on the other, themselves at odds with communities defined by the bounds of 'ethnic-nationalism,' whilst all living within a combination of countries or states providing a common area of sovereign jurisdiction (**Evans and Marchal, 2015**).

On a more localised but equally important level, the result of hegemonic narratives about sovereign power and legal jurisdiction over territorial spaces has in the past led to 'crazy quilt-like' urban areas such as those found in medieval Paris (**Low, 2016**). Although it is common for academic engagement with such historical instances of strife to concentrate primarily on the variously-defined spectre of nationalism and its relation to the concept of nation, there is a clear necessity to view such historical case studies in the light of territorial concerns and sovereign identities as well. In many ways this approach can avoid some of the pitfalls of studying nationalism: a broader perspective would dispel the common misreading of Anderson's argument as an invitation to dismiss nationalist claims as mere creations of human willpower; and it also provides contextual evidence to challenge the opposing fallacy of the inherent historical validity of modern nation states (on the evolving definitions of nationalism see **Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1987; Hobsbawm, 1990**; and for a more recent review and general rebuttal of these concepts **Hroch, 2015: 1-12**).

Aside from these broader cross-disciplinary claims the symposium produced numerous hypotheses regarding the academic categorisation of nations, sovereignty, and territory in terms of the theoretical connotations of these terms. In the three concepts, there is a potential division of implications of a common shared past, present, or future. The construction and development of the nation (if we are to see, as has been popular since Benedict Anderson's (**1991**) *Imagined Communities*, the promotion of national characteristics as being unavoidably a process of modern conception of the past) is, on one hand, a method of defining oneself through a channelled appreciation of what has gone before. The notion of sovereignty, on the other hand, inescapably has an aspect of the present about it, being as it is an identity attached inseparably to one individual, family, or dynasty. This lends conversations of sovereign identity an immediacy in their own time and a specific time period from the point of view of academic research. Finally, as was demonstrated in the papers regarding the interest in and acquisition of territory, this last term is a key element of the process by which groups plan their own future expansion or consolidation within geographical space. The concept of 'territorialisation,' exploring power relations in the context of how social



processes spatially organise territories, has been used to this end as a method of deconstructing the sovereignty of the European Union (**Bialasiewicz et al, 2005**). The further definition of territory as a construction in opposition to neighbouring entities – in line with Edward Said's (**2003**) notions of the characterisation of the West as an operation of creating an Other against which to draw social comparisons – allows the term a fluctuating identity dependent on 'other spaces' throughout the passage of time and through perceived future developments in these neighbouring constructed spaces (**Foucault, 1986**).

When one considers the developments and trends in academic thought over the last fifty years, with the influential concepts posited by scholars such as Foucault, Said, and Anderson but also with broader schools of theoretical thought such as neo-historicism and the return of comparative philology, it is clear that one of these three categories cannot be appreciated fully in the absence of the context provided by the other two. In doing so, and in operating rigidly within a disciplinary context, scholars leave themselves open to pitfalls such as being unaware of broader theoretical contexts and overlooking developments in neighbouring fields. The combination of the following papers provides a detailed analysis which will hopefully in turn provide the stimulation for new research in each of the involved disciplines.

## **Conclusions**

A symposium which failed to stimulate further thought would be a disappointment to say the least, and what will hopefully become apparent from these articles is that while the commonalities which exist across the various disciplines of academic thought cannot simply solve hitherto unexplained problems of nationality, sovereignty, or territory, they can certainly stimulate new and unpredictable lines of research for future collaboration projects. Investigations into how and why significant events come to pass benefit from cross-disciplinary input. It would take an overly-bold (or unusually brilliant) mind to reach an all-encompassing theory of the cultural performances of elite ideologies from one viewpoint and one school of methodological approach alone. Indeed, the benefits of the application of an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand contemporary political problems are numerous.

In testing the waters of interdisciplinary research, the objective has been to draw on a number of methodological techniques to uncover different ways elite groups have historically made sense of and ordered the world around them. The research projects outlined in the critical reflection each explored numerous social techniques that construct and order narratives depicting space. This reflects the potential of interdisciplinary studies to highlight differences and similarities across academic disciplines, while

appreciating the value of such knowledge at different stages of its construction. In this sense, what has long been considered 'constructivism,' albeit ironically associated with disciplines like international relations (Wendt, 1999) or history (Geary, 2002), could be something worth striving towards when presenting truly interdisciplinary results. The historical construction of space(s) seems beset by alternative narratives, after all, which render the possibility of any homogenous nation, sovereignty, or territory impossible.

This introductory article thus provides considerable scope for analysis of key socio-spatial themes in global politics. In particular, when looking at narratives of nationalism, sovereignty, or territory, it seems that space and time co-produce fertile narratives needed for global political change and order. These narratives themselves could be viewed as expressions of a wider social will, and are often promoted by elite members of a society in order to serve various political ends. Narrating the nation is often achieved with reference to historic tropes promoted by such an elite who wish to secure or disrupt the continuity of a specific group of people; in comparison, sovereignty emerges from an expressed willingness of an elite to secure the past, present, and future within the scope of world order. Narrating territory is as much about expressing the present order as it is about the future, while 'territoriality' exists as a spatial phenomenon through which knowledge and power affect change.

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