

On States and Territories¹

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The contributors to this symposium comprise a fine selection of scholars who are deeply embedded in both the history of, and the contemporary situation in, Israel–Palestine and yet have reached entirely opposite conclusions regarding the future there. Some argue for the two-state solution, whereas others favour a single, binational state. As one who lacks both of the attributes on which their cases are based—I am well informed on neither the history nor the current situation—I am poorly placed to evaluate the various merits and demerits of their cases. Simply re-rehearsing what they say would have little point, so in this brief commentary I have decided that rather than focus on their arguments I will take a step backwards—or is it sideways?—and look instead at more generic concerns regarding states (I hesitate to call them theoretical!). This, I hope, sets out the criteria by which I, and others in my situation as an interested outsider, might evaluate the separate cases made in the foregoing essays.

A feature that characterizes all contemporary states—and also all previous institutions with state-like features—is that they are territorially defined: a key criterion in defining each state involves identifying (cartographically and “on the ground”) the territories that it—more precisely, its state apparatus—controls (see Giddens 1984, 1985; Mann 1984, who argues that state power is necessarily geographical, exercised from a central place over a unified territorial reach). We cannot be certain that this is a necessary criterion for a state’s existence—simply because all states so far have been and are territorially defined does not mean that a state could not be successfully created that was not so defined (a classic case of Popper’s falsifiability principle)—but all the empirical

evidence suggests that it is. Furthermore, arguments can be deployed that the nature of the state—an apparatus for the control of people, relationships, and “things”—is such that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for it to undertake its necessary tasks (to exercise the four categories of power identified by Mann—economic, ideological, military, and political) unless it were territorially defined.

Territory and territoriality (the exercise of power through territorial strategies: Sack 1986) are tied up with a further feature of the state that is a necessary criterion for its existence: its sovereignty. A sovereign state is one whose right to exist is recognized by others. With that recognition comes acceptance of the state apparatus’s right to exercise power over those subject to it, and the agreement of other states—save in exceptional circumstances—not to challenge that right: in effect, to allow each state apparatus to control its territory (and hence its people) and what occurs within it. This combination of internal and external definitions of sovereignty clarifies the argument regarding territory and territoriality. As Giddens (1984, 1985), Mann (1984), Sack (1986), and others have argued, unless a state is territorially defined and can operate territoriality strategies, its power is, at best, limited and probably under continual threat. Without a clearly defined territory, it is difficult for a state to fulfil its basic functions (discussed below)—which does not mean that the actual extent of that territory might not be challenged by one or more other states: the right to exist may not incorporate the right to all of the claimed territory. (For much of the 20th century, for example, the Republic of Ireland accepted the sovereign right of the United Kingdom to exist while challenging

its claim to Northern Ireland.)

Although “theory” may suggest a very strong link between sovereignty and territory—you can’t have one without the other—it says nothing (or very little) about the nature of that territory, such as its extent, shape, and boundedness. It may be generally accepted that smaller territories are more readily controlled than more extensive tracts (especially if the resources to be deployed are limited), but there are many counter-examples. The same might be said—though perhaps with less certainty—about the topology of the claimed territory. Is a compact area more readily controlled than one that is oddly shaped and, especially, one that is fragmented? Again, counter-examples can be presented (such as the globally scattered empires “ruled” by superpowers, which eventually fell because of “over-stretch”: Kennedy 1987), but it is a reasonable generalization that divided territories (let alone very fragmented territories) are more difficult to govern—and to sustain as viable states (as was the case when, between 1947 and 1971, Bangladesh was an exclave of Pakistan)—than those composed of single, coherent blocks of land.

Within its sovereign territory, what are the main roles of the state? At a high level of generalization, three roles, usually associated with O’Connor (1972), are often identified for contemporary capitalist states:

Securing a consensus from all groups within society around the mode of production and its particular local formation. This accepts its underlying principles and therefore ensures order and stability within the territory governed by and through the relevant state apparatus.

Sustaining and enhancing the conditions for capitalism’s successful reproduction, which ensures continued profit-making and thereby generates support for the state and its actions by the “capitalist fraction” within society.

Guaranteeing social integration and the welfare of all by, for example, ensuring that

all fractions of society enjoy the fruits of capitalist wealth production and are protected from its vicissitudes.

The first is necessary—indeed, almost certainly a *sine qua non*—because without such universal acceptance of internal sovereignty (which may or may not be indicated through a democratic system), the state apparatus would find it very difficult to undertake the other two roles. In most cases, this consensus is achieved because the population living within the state’s defined territory accepts its legitimacy—it has to reflect the popular will, in general though not necessarily with regard to every policy. For many, such consensus is strongly associated with national identity: The state’s population should share an identification with the state, including its territory. Such an association may be present in many cases—the (vast majority of the) population identifies with the state because it identifies with key characteristics that citizens share with one another (such as language, ethnicity, and religion), and those who join the state (immigrants, for example) accept that identification. Where it is absent, however, the state apparatus has to create it, though processes of nation building that link territory, identity, and collectively exercised power.

The absence of such a consensus presents a challenge to the state apparatus and its control over the state territory, which may be countered by coercion, though, as many examples have shown in the recent past, this is difficult to sustain for long periods without massive resources with which to exercise power. With consensus support (albeit perhaps grudging in some cases) the state apparatus will have the freedom to undertake its other two roles: basically, to promote capitalism, so that wealth is created, and to ensure that the outcomes are reasonably equitably distributed throughout the population (which probably means throughout the territory). Without the latter, the state apparatus can face a legitimation crisis, because a substantial proportion of its population feels that it is not

benefiting enough. Without the former, it can face a rationality crisis, because investors (real and potential) lack confidence in its policies and their likely returns.² Governments thus face a very difficult and continual balancing act as they seek the compromises necessary to keep class conflict under control and sustain support from both sections of the population (or, at least, avoid outright opposition from one class). If they fail for substantial periods, then the legitimization and rationality crises can feed off each other—unrest among the proletariat stimulates withdrawal by capitalist investors, which exacerbates proletarian unrest, and so on—and lead to a full crisis of accumulation in which the ability of the state apparatus (and not just one particular government in control of that apparatus) is called into question.

What is the relevance of all of this for the debates over the future of Israel–Palestine and the two-state or binational state solutions to the current situation? My goal in this brief essay has been to focus attention on a few key features of these proposed solutions. If the two-state solution is pursued, what territorial structuring will make it feasible? This is a key question, given the likely fragmentation of territory based on the current situation, regardless of exactly where boundaries may be drawn. And if an acceptable division of the territory can be achieved, will that allow each state apparatus to undertake successfully the three roles set out here, as well as those of ensuring both external and internal security and of delivering law and order equally to all people and all parts of the territory? Alternatively, if the binational state solution is preferred, removing the need for intense and extensive debates over territory, will it be feasible to build a state apparatus that has the willing consent of a vast majority of the

population within that territorial container? Such a state apparatus would have to convince all sections of the territory and population that they have equal economic, cultural, and political rights, as well as facilitating the successful promotion of capitalism and ensuring that all sections of the population benefit, if not equally, then at least sufficiently so that a legitimization crisis is not always looming and threatening a rationality crisis—and eventually a full-scale crisis of accumulation that leads to the collapse of the state apparatus and perhaps its territorial dismemberment.

Notes

- ¹ My thanks to Les Hepple for a valuable discussion of and comments on this commentary.
- ² The crisis terminology comes from Habermas (1976).

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