Lecture IV. Deterritorialization and Democracy

Approaching globalization means understanding the phenomenon of ‘deterritorialization.” Some understand this as the ‘disembedding” of social practices and relationships, the lifting of them out of their settings in distinctive places and reembedding them in distant spaces (but not necessarily any particular place. Others call this phenomenon ‘delocalization’ emphasizing the shift in the subjective orientation, from the local to the global. Both descriptions emphasize the stretching and spreading of social practices and relationships to and across distant spaces produced by the reach and speed of new modes of travel and communication. Others more broadly understand deterritoriality as the living of life inside of unbounded flows and networks, as a rhyzomatic life of constant, nomadic movement. The effect of deterritorialization on politics and the state can be profound.

Territoriality has governed state practice in Europe since at least the late seventeenth century. It is closely associated with state sovereignty as this develops in Europe, and is extended to the planet more widely through colonialism, after the Peace of Westphalia. At its most simple this refers to the situating of life and community in fixed, securely bounded spaces. The first defining characteristic of territorial states is the fixing of borders. The state, one historical sociologist claims, can be understood as a container of social relations. It is important to distinguish a second, related meaning to territoriality as well. This is the linkage of life and community with place. In one respect, this meaning derives from a post-Darwinian anthropology, which considered territoriality as instinctual and natural to human life, as it is to much of animal life. Humans are driven to defend and control their ‘territory’. This sense of territoriality comes to be transferred to the theory of the sovereign state in nationalism or some
form of patriotism that associates the state with a ‘homeland,’ or ‘mother/father land’. I will describe this second sense as the association of the state with the metaphor of ‘home.’

So, territoriality means living within fixed borders, policed by the state, and the constituting community as linked to a particular system of proximity, what I call ‘home’. By **proximity** I refer to the networks of relations that create among people a sense of a shared fate. What is the meaning of contiguity for human social experience, i.e. what does it matter that we see each other regularly, that we are ‘in proximity’ to one another? How do the technologies and media which produce proximities inflect the way we life? Territoriality refers us to the system of proximity within fixed borders, policed by a sovereign authority. Community is imagined to be consistent with these territorial boundaries. In other words, territory is imagined through the image of unity. Proximity is seen as a largely consistent, interlocking system. In other words, territoriality implies that people can live a full, meaningful and ethical life within the borders of the state. One way in which territoriality creates this sense of unity and consistency in space and time is by making possible the history of the nation-state. Territoriality enables the telling of stories of ‘development’ and duration over time, the effect of which is to reinforce a people’s sense of their unity as a community. One way to think about this is that territoriality is a technique or technology for managing time and space. That is, it organizes, simultaneously and in conjunction, our imagining of living space and the material power and form of control over that space.

In this way, territoriality **naturalizes** space. It makes a particular metaphysics of space seem to be natural and universal. One way to think of this is to recognize how territoriality privileges a particular practice of boundary-making between human communities. Real boundaries are legally sanctioned fixed borders. Even natural barriers (rivers, mountains, etc…)
appear in our social imaginary as less secure than the legal borders. The other spaces in which life is lived – cities, villages, cross-border communities (ethnic, religious, etc...) loose their autonomy as places – cities become ‘American’ cities, the local becomes a function of the national.

Part of the appeal of the territorial state is that it has become natural to assume that political and social life must be organized territorially in order to make sense for human beings and to be secure. With the naturalization of the territorial state, comes a particular approach to security that sanctions violence and hardens dichotomies of self and other. Since borders are fixed they must be defended at the spot – all movement across them must be prevented or temporarily suspended while the institutions of surveillance judge the subjects who would cross the lines. Seventeenth and eighteenth century social contract theory drew on this naturalization, considering those indigenous peoples who did not live within fixed, sovereign communities as having no government and hence no order and security at all. When Hobbes and Locke describe the native peoples of the Americas as continuing to live in a state of nature, they are not accurately describing the New World’s peoples as they are reaffirming for their own theories the unity, identity, and superiority of the European territorial state. Territoriality, then, makes it difficult to imagine life as lived to the fullest in alternative spaces, hence the pejorative connotation of being ‘stateless’, and its association with ‘rootlessness’. Of course, the system of sovereign states reinforces this seemingly natural order in several ways, most notably through a system of rights in which rights are only reinforced by states.

Deterritorialization refers us to the ways in which proximity is changing, hence its centrality to the idea of globalization. Nearly all of the aspects of territoriality are problematized by the new technologies of travel, speed, and communication. Policing fixed borders becomes
more and more difficult, sanctioning greater uses and threats of violence, as transnational and
global flows accelerate in time and proliferate in number. Of course, capitalist economies have
always involved cross-border flows of goods and labor. Indeed, Marx was a prescient theorist of
globalization in this respect. The existence of alternative spaces in which life was lived by
modern subjects has been part of and necessary to, the constitution of the nation-state system.
Without them the states-system would not have developed. Take trade, for example, which
territorial states had to see as both an opportunity and a threat; states both sought out trade as a
means to enhance their wealth and improve their military technologies, but also which they
feared as generating rival loyalties and flows of uncontrollable bodies across their borders). But
the volume, speed, density and complexity of the digitized information networks render borders
more porous. The compression of time and space, as geographer David Harvey describes the
condition of globalization, generates flows that exceed current technologies of control. To the
extent that states can now police their borders, they cannot do so by the traditional territorial
means. Nuclear weapons had already made this obvious. The impossibility of defending the
‘inside’ of the state by militarily preventing attacks from ‘outside’ meant that security had to take
on broader meanings. With recent population flows, surveillance has intensified, and been
globalized -- using satellites more than traditional border guards, for example, which makes the
border less important to policing the entry and exit of populations into the state.

A number of theorists focus on the contradictions between territoriality and
deterritorialization. William E. Connolly is one of the most significant. One issue he highlights
is the implication of the persistence of the state as the focus of political institutionalization and
allegiance and the globalization of contingency, what David Held had described as the
globalization of communities of fate. As people become implicated more deeply in global flows
of capital and labor, and as real sources of insecurity proliferate globally – pollution, climate
cchange, diseases, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, etc… -- the state faces what is often termed a
‘democratic deficit’. Connolly goes beyond the theory of the democratic deficit, arguing that the
globalization of contingency does not represent so much the weakness of democracy as a
repositioning and resituating of important life processes and relationships. New forms of power
are emerging – not just displaced forms of state power – to regulate these global life processes
(for example, genetic engineering to track and eliminate planetarily mobile diseases, or to create
new crops to eliminate famine and poverty). The state remains both powerful and an important
focus of democratic politics, but new forms of politics are needed to complement traditional
forms of representation and governmental accountability. These are more cosmopolitan and
grassroots politics, for example those in social movements. Significantly, Connolly also focuses
on the ways in which the globalization of contingency has rejuvenated repressive forms of
politics as territorial states seek to suture the borders of territorial communities.

More difficult issues arise from the problem of the political imaginary of territoriality as
‘home’. To what degree does democracy require a secure space whose security is produced
through the idealization of relations inside (the ‘happy home’, the space of love without conflict)
and the exclusion of danger and threat on the ‘outside’? To what degree can democratic citizens
live with the uncertainties and contingencies of a global world in which the ‘outside’ routinely
pours in and in which the ‘inside’ routinely extends out? Feminist theory has explored this
dynamic in its critiques of the public/private dichotomy in modern political theory, and feminist
theory might provide a resource for current democratic theory, as it does for both Honig and
Benhabib.
Lecture IV – Territoriality/deterritorialization (6)

Deterritorialization raises new issues that require that democratic theorists both revisit the relation of democracy to the state and explore new forms of democratic citizenship. We will do this in the coming weeks.