

Spaces of Transference: The New Transnational Politics of Secular Stagnation

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Abstract

This paper reevaluates recent work on deterritorialization in so far as it relates to transnationalization and the emergence of new forms of nomadic politics. Place has been crucial in the formation of social relationships, the interactive construction of political identities and the emergence of a public sphere. Contemporary forms of deterritorialization tend to disrupt two fundamental conceptions of the modern understanding of democratic politics: the fellowship of citizens and the fiduciary nature of the relationship between political power and those represented. Building on Kevin Cox's distinction between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement, the paper argues that spaces of transference emerge as a vital component of today's political relating. Scale becomes important in the spaces of transference: the shifting of attitudes and emotions involves larger spaces and ever more distant templates.

Keywords: Deterritorialization, transnational politics, space, representation, secular stagnation

1. Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to outline the role of deterritorialization in the study of transnational politics and to point to aporias, gaps, possible paths and promising directions in relation to the links between transnationalization and the emergence of new forms of nomadic politics. The use of 'possible' implies that we single out one path out of several; it implies also that its probability has not been established. And – let us clarify this from the outset – my approach to the issues is the approach of the political scientist and the international relations scholar not the optic of the geographer or the urban specialist.

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The role of place in shaping political identity has been long acknowledged to be crucial, as indeed has been the role of the city in politics. In fact, the significance of the city for the emergence of politics as a human activity has been a catalyst, to the point that the proliferation of disciplines that focus, in ever more sophisticated ways, on aspects of the city and its life may sometimes contribute to the fading of the big picture. One dimension is crucial: the importance of place in the formation of social relationships, on the interaction between political attitudes and points of view, on the formation of political identities and, of course, the creation of a public sphere (Wills 2013: 142-143).

What is the political role of place today? More specifically, do developments associated with transnationalization and globalization alter the links between territoriality and political activity and, if they do, in what ways? Ideally, an innovative argument should lead the reader in logical steps from familiar, accepted premises to an unobvious conclusion. To the extent that one can approximate this ideal, one aspires to at least pointing to novel ways of looking at familiar phenomena. Let's begin with the very concepts of 'territory', 'place', and 'space'. 'Territory' has an arithmetic / measurable dimension; 'place' possesses a relational quality about it; while 'space' has been used in various ways and in the most abstract fashion, in spite of its immediate scientific connotations.

A provocative contemporary take on these concepts is the one suggested by Elden(2005). He argues that the modern notion of territory 'is both a historical development and has a particular conceptual basis. Territory in the modern sense requires a level of cartographic ability that was simply lacking in earlier periods, an ability that is closely related to advances in geometry' (Elden 2005: 16). Similarly, 'the emergence of a notion of space rests upon a shift in mathematical and philosophical understanding, related particularly to geometry'. In Elden's view, 'this development is partnered by a change in conceptions of the state and its territory. The modern notion of measure, which finds its most explicit exponent in Descartes, sees beings as calculable, as quantitatively measurable, as extended; for Descartes calculation is the fundamental determination of the world. Put crudely, to be is to be calculable' (Elden 2005: 17).

Leaving aside for now the obvious objection that – as recent advances in neuroscience have confirmed – there appears to be quite a lot in terms of research evidence that is in fact favorable to the Kantian notion of space as an inbuilt principle of the mind, we can keep the innovative aspects of the aforementioned approach as we shift our attention somewhat and focus on the adventures of the social perceptions of ‘space’ and, even more so, of ‘territory’ and ‘place’.

2 Territoriality is Relational

If we confine ourselves to this focus, we discover that various forms of negotiating territoriality have been developing at least since the Westphalian conception of statehood started giving way to more mediated and relativized approaches. As social relations started escaping the giant locks that states represented, processes of what scholars labeled ‘transnationalization’ became the norm rather than the exception in everyday, routine states-economy-society interactions. Transnational economic links, transnational information flows, transnational cultural exchange, transnationalized production networks, and – since the 1980s – a truly transnational capital market, all attest to the emergence of a new global reality. At the same time, as states and transnational activities of societal actors continue to coexist, patterns of reciprocity had to emerge. As a scholar nicely put it at an early stage of the debate, there is ‘enough reciprocal benefit from each others’ presence’ (Peterson 1992: 388). International relations theory has not always been attentive to the more nuanced implications of the distinctions between space, place, and territory. In an otherwise very interesting and important account of territoriality in international relations, Ruggie suggested that “nonterritorial functional space” is the new “place wherein international society is anchored” (Ruggie 1993: 165).

Of course, pundits were quick to notice that reality does not conform to a simplistic conception of a unilinear process leading to a uniformly ‘globalized’ world. We need to depart from the assumption of an increasingly homogenous landscape as a result of the open movement of capital, people, and ideas (Bruszt&Holzhacker 2009: 3-4). Convergence (a) has structural and cultural limits and (b) is mediated by significant domestic variables. Hence the comparative study of transnationalization(s) means, first of all, the analysis of variation in the properties and features of interacting domestic and external actors. Does FDI come in a form that is easy to exit or in a form that entails longer-term commitment?

Do dense institutional networks at the domestic level encourage or limit transnationalization in its various forms? Do well-established forms of domestic accountability limit or encourage further transnational integration of domestic actors at various levels (civil society, local, regional, sectoral)? The comparative study of transnationalization(s) means, second, the analysis of similarities AND differences in the mechanisms that mediate interactions between the actors engaged in transnationalization games. Such mechanisms could be incentives, opportunities, sanctions, penalties, forms of conditionality, etc. (Bruszt&Holzhacker 2009: 3-4).

Still the question lingers – to what extent do developments such as these actually challenge the geographical determinants of politics? In an influential contribution, Cox (1998) had distinguished between ‘spaces of dependence’ (interests and attachments that refer to place) and ‘spaces of engagement’ (arrangements used by local actors who wish to reproduce their spaces of dependence). As his colleagues have noted, by calling attention to the extra-local factors and forces marshalled for the consolidation of political identity and the reproduction of the local, Cox opened the door to subsequent analyses that explored the relational dimension of local and urban politics (Jonas and Wood 2012: 9-10).

Indeed, at first it had appeared as if the new blossoming of the forces and the transactions that permeated states and worked above them, through them, and beneath them but not necessarily with them, would accentuate the role of the local. Yet as transnationalization and globalization acquired momentum, not only national but also regional and local governance became ever more relative and, ultimately, even more depended on extra-local relations and resources – ideational, epistemic, and material. Taking stock of ‘high transnationalization’ appears to lead to questioning the very distinctions globalization appeared to be favoring. In an innovative paper, Allen & Cochrane (2007) argued that “increasingly, it would seem that there is little to be gained by talking about [urban or]regional governance as a territorial arrangement when a number of the political elements assembled [...] are ‘parts’ of elsewhere, representatives of professional authority, expertise,skills and interests drawn together to move forward varied agendas and programmes. There is [...] an interplay of forces where a range of actors mobilize, enroll, translate, channel,broker and bridge in ways that make different kinds of government possible” (Allen &Cochrane 2007: 1171).

Recent work on urban policy-making has followed this path. In their influential *Mobile Urbanism*, McCann & Ward (2011) emphasize the ways in which urban policy-making taps into the circulation of 'parts of elsewhere,' and that cities are emergent translocal assemblages, or moments in more globally-extensive flows. This concept of a 'mobile urbanism' opens the door to further research that will aim to decipher the various ways in which networks, technology, interests, expertise, and cultural patterns impact and help shape politics and policy (McCann & Ward 2011).

Where does that leave us? From the perspective of politics, policy change and policy conflict, we need to pay more attention to space and the spatial dimensions of contestation, including the analysis of the scale of political activity, the geographical determinants of collective action, the interaction among units close to or far from one another, and the more general impact of distance and proximity (Hochschild 2009: 249-251). In this context, we would add that we need to take particularly seriously two fundamental concerns of current debates on space and territory: the relational dimension of territory and the increasingly deterritorialized implications of political and economic developments and choices, including approaches to economic policy that acquire a permanent or, at any rate, impressively persistent status. It is to these aspects that we now turn.

3 Spaces of Transference: Neo-Nomadism and Secular Stagnation

A problem with the ever growing literature on deterritorialization is that it limits itself to phenomena largely associated with urban politics and the new modalities of urban policy-making. Yet deterritorialization is fast becoming a field of immense significance for the understanding transnational politics as well. In fact, the study of transnationalization should be expanded to include other, rather more deviant – and certainly less predictable – phenomena.

3. 1. Secular Stagnation and the Mutation of Place

Secular stagnation, a condition of persistently negligible or no economic growth in a market-based economy, acquires the status of an economic regime once in place. It may be the result of a multitude of factors – as in Japan's 'lost decade' – or it may be the combined outcome of chance, conditions, and deliberate economic policy.

Despite the abundance of relevant studies and the advances accomplished over recent years, it still remains a daunting task to fully comprehend and analyze the underlying mechanism of persistent stagnations, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and Japan's 'lost decade' of the 1990s (Ono and Ishida 2014: 42). Many analysts argue that the European Union has entered a period of such persistent stagnation. Although by no means a universally accepted view, the argument put forward by Stiglitz and others combine empirical observation and extrapolations based on the apparent lack of a dynamic of growth let alone a mechanism that would spur such a dynamic.

In Europe, economic thinking and economic policy have resulted in "stagnation by design" in an attempt to boost exports, strengthen competitiveness and clear up the economic scene (Stiglitz 2014). But the price has been extremely heavy, in regions and localities across Europe and in particular countries as well, including Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Italy, among others. "European leaders have consistently overestimated where the economy was going. Unfortunately, the leaders of Europe, in particular Germany, don't seem to recognize that austerity is one of the reasons Europe is doing so poorly," according to Stiglitz said. He considers austerity measures the wrong prescription for repairing the euro zone economy. In contrast, Germany's Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schaeuble refused the notion that Germany's economy was falling into recession: "We don't have a recession in Germany, we have a weakening of growth". Be that as it may, generally gloomy news about the fragile health of the European economy and the struggle between Germany and France over whether austerity measures are the proper cure for struggling gross domestic product growth, are combined with more doubts emerging amid economists about the strength of the recovery (Rynik 2014).

As Wolfgang Münchau (2014) argues,

"Secular stagnation is [...] a lot more dramatic than a debt crisis. With such a threat hanging over us, one would have thought every rational policy maker would want to avoid such a calamity. That would indeed be the case if the crisis occurred in a normal country. For a monetary union where policy is not co-ordinated and where policy makers take a national perspective, the risk of secular stagnation looms large. Even the European Central Bank, the only actor with a eurozone-wide remit, faces legal constraints. This may explain its reluctance to go for quantitative easing [...]."

Eurozone policy makers face three choices. First, they can transform the eurozone into a political union, and do whatever it takes: a eurobond, a small fiscal union, transfer mechanisms and a banking union worthy of its name. Second, they can accept secular stagnation. The final choice is a break-up of the eurozone. The second and third choices are not mutually exclusive. As the political union is firmly off the table, this leaves us with a choice between depression and failure – or both in succession”.

In effect, a new generation of largely apolitical leadership risks plunging Europe in a period of prolonged social unrest and political instability. The longer-term horizon of stagnation has various implications on the social and the societal levels and leads to a variety of responses. Some of the latter exacerbate the tensions between place, dependency, and frustration. In urban and territorial politics, spatial entrapment has often been linked to local dependence plus – crucially – a relatively weak geographical mobility of labor and an inability to break out of local labor markets. Surely, the variety of strategies used by different actors in order to cope with spatial entrapment is a research theme that calls for a number of research directions (Cox 2012: 209-210). However, an economic management orthodoxy that leads to stagnation, crises in housing, waves of repossession, and inability to find employment, give to the more general sense of spatial entrapment a new twist and a new poignancy.

3. 2. Neo-Nomadism and the City

Certainly there has been no de-urbanization on the whole. The population of cities on the planet continues to grow: from 34% of the total population in 1960 cities' population reached 54% of the total in 2014. However, the relationship of the urban environment to politics and political change has been shifting, and it has not been shifting in the direction of further strengthening the features and the sort of influences we had anticipated. We already noted the fundamental role of the city in politics as a human activity. We do not have to be neo-Aristotelian in our understanding of politics in order to be able to grasp the significance of place in the formation of social relationships and the interactive making of political identities.

Yet place is not significant the way – and in the direction – it used to be.

Today the big picture concerns the very role of cities and of urban space in political development; and the various and multiple implications of the systematic destruction of cities (e.g., in today's Middle East) for the present and the future of political life. It is this dimension that is currently threatened by two clearly distinct but not totally unrelated sets of factors. On the one hand, a set of factors relates to the complex phenomenon of the decline of the middle classes in the West. Indeed, the core of Western political culture of cities has been eroded in a number of ways, both subtle and not-so-subtle: the middle classes, under pressure financially and abandoning the centers to move to suburbs geographically, have ceased to be the core of the *polis* in many countries. Most democracies appear to struggle to meet the challenge of balancing equity and efficiency in public policy: most solutions aiming to tackle the most impressive and widening of inequalities have failed, while some of them have erred on the side of inefficiency (Comfort 2009: 210-212).

At the same time, more foreign fighters supporting the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq are registered in 2014. The UN Security Council has held several sessions in 2014 on the "foreign fighter phenomenon". By November 2014, an "unprecedented" number of foreign fighters — some 15,000 from more than 80 countries — have made their way to Syria and Iraq, and their numbers continue to grow, according to a UN Security Council report. The report warns that "the horizontal reach of the fighters is far broader than seen before," and "includes a tail of countries that have not previously faced challenges related to Al-Qaida". Most of the fighters in Syria hail from the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, but the report observed that others have also come from the United States and parts of Asia. And, while the capabilities of al Qaeda's central leadership are not as strong as they once were, the report calls attention to the fact that extremist ideology has become diffuse, spreading via the internet and social media. The result is that the Islamic State has blown past its predecessors in reaching potential recruits around the world, including many from Europe (Oakford2014).

It is possible to relate the foreign fighter phenomenon to difficulties in immigrants' assimilation and acceptance in their host countries. As a scholar put it recently, "[t]he reasons for ISIS's recruiting successes are likely as varied as the recruits themselves, including youth unemployment and globalization itself. But clearly many European recruits are pushed toward joining ISIS by their failure to be assimilated, accepted, and respected by their adoptive countries.

The challenge for Europe going forward will be to change its treatment of immigrants even as it rightfully recognizes the danger some within those ranks pose" (Bass 2014).

But this approach, although it may appear suitable in some cases (e.g., France), may be difficult to apply in some other cases (e.g., the UK). And – more importantly – leaves out the most intriguing aspect: the trajectories of non-immigrants, of European and US citizens, who choose to join IS. In fact, the Sunni jihadists who are the backbone of IS represent the path of transition to a neo-nomadic era in the Middle East and beyond. The systematic destruction of cities in Syria and Iraq, combined with the evolution of IS as a catch-all mobile totalitarian machine without a country, raise wider issues. In the region itself, Turkey, which initially saw an opportunity (the destruction of Kurdish enclaves in Syria) has found it necessary to reconsider. Iran has entered a period of internal reflection on the issue and even Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies that have traditionally encouraged forms of jihadism abroad are now concerned about the management of the phenomenon. An international alliance to defeat IS, although clearly outside the scope of the present paper, brings to the fore issues of possible realignment in the region.

The two phenomena – social crisis in the midst of secular stagnation and the emergence of neo-nomadic politics in the Middle East – are only tenuously linked in a direct way (fighters joining IS from a troubled West and individual terrorists inspired by IS wreaking havoc on civilian targets in the West) but they share a common dimension: the displacement of frustration. In this particular context leading to terrorism and the politics of barbarism, the displacement of frustration challenges established notions of the relation between place and political identity.

There emerges a space of transference as a vital component of today's political relating. Transference – not in the Freudian psychoanalytic sense but in modern psychology – is important, among other reasons, because the shifting of attitudes, feelings and emotions from a person to another is in fact a mechanism through which someone is in fact relating to a template, a constructed representation rather than an actual person. New commitments but also new "enemies" are thus constructed. On paper, at least, modern democracies are ill suited to confront this development. In the Western liberal tradition, political power, because of its fiduciary nature, is to be exercised in trust for the benefit of those represented (Freeman 2001: 105-151).

And democratic political power has been tamed within historical polities in which a fellowship of citizens evolved in a basically homogenous political culture (Goodin 1988).

Fiduciary relations, which by their nature may require acting for another parties' interests even at the expense of one's own, e.g., when it is said that 'a company has a fiduciary duty to shareholders', constitute a part of the very core of representative politics. Transference in this realm disrupts two fundamental conceptions of the modern understanding of democratic politics: the fellowship of citizens and the fiduciary nature of the relationship between political power and those represented. At the same time, scale becomes important in the space of transference: the shifting of attitudes and emotions may involve larger spaces and ever more distant templates.

4. Conclusion

Summed up in one sentence, the tentative conclusion of this paper is that deterritorialization in the context of secular stagnation leads to new forms of transnational politics and, crucially, to a new and different phase in the displacement of social and political frustration. In this context, spaces of transference emerge as a vital component of today's political relating. Contemporary forms of deterritorialization tend to disrupt two fundamental conceptions of the modern understanding of democratic politics: the fellowship of citizens and the fiduciary nature of the relationship between political power and those represented. Meanwhile, we must remain on guard against the easy adoption of notions of "think global, act local". Although commendable at a purely normative level, such an exhortation may draw our attention away from the fact that it is the lack of a degree of global coordination (on diverse issues ranging from sustainable development to tax competition and capital movements) that discourages the search for the most effective means for balancing equity and efficiency in policy.

In effect, transnationalization redefines relations between governance, representation and territoriality, in ways that go well beyond the familiar challenge to the authority and significance of the "state". The scope of transnationalization extends to the realm of political psychology, as actors shift emotions and attitudes while searching for defensive mechanisms.

We are not in a position to claim that, without the stagnation's impact, there would have been no volunteers from the West fighting the wars of the most extremist champions of Jihad in the Middle East. But on the basis of current developments we can legitimately hypothesize that the politics of secular stagnation is a new, transnational politics.

Global, regional and national choices of economic management and their social implications are increasingly significant in determining the nature and scope of deterritorialized politics. The two phenomena – social crisis in the midst of secular stagnation and the emergence of neo-nomadic politics in the Middle East – are only tenuously linked in a direct way (fighters joining IS from a troubled West and individual terrorists inspired by IS operating in the West) but they share an important common dimension: the displacement of frustration challenges established notions of the relation between place and political identity. If the liquidators instead of the visionaries dominate developments in Europe's debt-ridden economies, the effects will include – among other phenomena – the relentless pursuit of alternatives not in the field of systematic public policy but in spaces of transference.

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