

Introduction: Approaching Space in Intellectual History

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1. Introduction

Notions of ‘space’ have become increasingly important to the practice of intellectual historians in recent years.¹ The pervasiveness of locutions such as the ‘international turn’, ‘global intellectual history’ and ‘political space’ seems to hint at a broader trend in the discipline.² Scholars have argued that ‘space is now the final frontier for intellectual history’, that it is not merely context but ‘a mode of intellectual production deserving of interpretation in its own right’, and that to take space seriously is ‘to read deliberately against the grain’.³ To be sure, spatial considerations have been central to the historical profession at large for several decades. Themes such as the ‘international’⁴ and ‘global’⁵, ‘borderlands’⁶, ‘territoriality’⁷, and ‘scale’⁸ as well as notions like ‘sacred space’⁹, ‘provincializing’¹⁰, or ‘mental maps’¹¹ – to name just a few – have acquired their place in the historical profession broadly conceived. But at the same time, space has only recently begun to feature prominently in the work of *intellectual* historians.

The fact that intellectual historians have been rather late to tap into the stream of spatial readings is no less the result of a disciplinary time-lag, than it is bound up with the subject matter of the discipline itself. This is especially true for historians of political thought, whose

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² Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History”; Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*; Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War*.

³ Armitage, “The International Turn,” 239; Randolph, “The Space of Intellect and the Intellect of Space,” 225; Brett, “The Space of Politics and the Space of War,” 34.

⁴ Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*.

⁵ Conrad, *What is Global History?*.

⁶ For a useful introduction, see Usner, “Borderlands.”

⁷ Maier, *Once Within Borders*. According to Maier, ‘territoriality is manifested less as a quality in its own right than as a property implicated with historical phenomena that change, whether frontiers, states, sovereignty, or economic resources’ (ibid., 7).

⁸ Aslanian, Chaplin, McGrath, and Mann, “AHR *Conversation* How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History.”

⁹ Coster and Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

¹¹ Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World*, 86-94.

work has foregrounded the intimate nexus of commonwealth and personality.¹² The ‘juridical metaphysics’ that forms the backbone of much of early modern and modern political thought, as Annabel Brett has rightly noted, ‘seems to pull directly against an intrinsically spatial conception of it.’¹³ With Hobbes, the state becomes an artificial man, and the international realm, too, is essentially about the relations between states-as-persons, up to the age of Kant.¹⁴ What is more, intellectual history seems to be a discipline in which the temporal nature of evidence casts an abiding shadow. Conceptual historians have centred their work around ‘time-layers’ (*Zeitschichten*) and temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*), especially in the *Sattelzeit*, while contextualists, in tracking the interventions of authors and the movements of language in and over *time*, equally tend to assume the longitudinal character of most of their studies.¹⁵ What Harvey Starr noted with reference to the discipline of international relations – that it is ‘the temporal dimension’ which ‘seems to be privileged’¹⁶ – might well apply to intellectual history as well.

Yet the picture is not as bleak as we may have painted it thus far. There are at least three ways in which we may highlight the presence of conceptions of space in intellectual history and the history of political thought. First, it is important to note that a preoccupation with ‘time’ does not necessarily come at the expense of spatial considerations. Historians of political thought who embrace a *longue durée* perspective have long produced histories that push beyond the quintessential spatial unit of the commonwealth, as a glance at J.G.A. Pocock’s *oeuvre* – from its earliest stages – reveals abundantly.¹⁷ More recently, the notion of ‘serial contextualism’ has revived and further developed the idea of combining a temporal extension in the study of intellectual history with a global expansion of the places and spaces under consideration.¹⁸

Secondly, in the wake of a growing focus on the spheres beyond and between individual commonwealths, historians of medieval, early modern, and modern political thought have also begun to investigate theorizations of global order, international commercial competition, and

¹² Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*; Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*; Barker, *Essays on Government*.

¹³ Brett, “The Space of Politics and the Space of War,” 33.

¹⁴ Richard Tuck speaks of the ‘Hobbesianism’ of Rousseau and Kant. See Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace*, chs 4 and 7. For the broader purchase of this Hobbesian conception of international order, see also the contributions in Kadelbach, Kleinlein, and Roth-Isigkeit (eds), *System, Order, and International Law*

¹⁵ Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*; Koselleck, *Futures Past*; Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. I.

¹⁶ Starr, “On Geopolitics,” 433.

¹⁷ See e.g. Pocock, “The Origins of Study of the Past.” For a discussion of this and other dimensions of Pocock’s early work, see Haakonssen and Whatmore, “Global Possibilities in Intellectual History.”

¹⁸ See e.g. Armitage, *Civil Wars*; Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire*.

empire.¹⁹ In the context of this emerging turn to the *global* in intellectual history, scholars have begun to probe a diverse set of novel (spatial) analytical tools, ranging from ‘intellectual networks’²⁰, to ‘interpolity zones’²¹, to the ‘reference theory of globalized ideas’²². Thirdly and finally, however, we must not forget that conceptions of space in intellectual history are by no means solely implicated in the turn to the global, as Stuart Elden’s genealogy of the notion of ‘territory’, or Annabel Brett’s study of the (meta)physical space of the early modern *civitas* shows.²³ In this vein, it is equally noteworthy that intellectual historians have recently come to emphasize the political implications of neglected spheres *within* the commonwealth, such as the gendered space of the household.²⁴

The present special issue does not seek to delimit the wide range of potential approaches to ‘space’ lined out in the previous paragraphs. Rather, it brings together suggestions for novel ways of making conceptions of space useful for intellectual historians, with contributions that span a variety of diverse topics and range from the early modern period to the twentieth century. While below we outline certain thematic groupings, the articles can also be seen as falling into two very broad categories depending on the type of space they feature. Some have focused on space as a specific kind of place, often, though not exclusively, territory, tracing its entanglements with law, history, and politics to examine its meaning and significance for broader debates. Thus understood, space can be located on a geographical scale from the ‘local’ to the ‘regional’ to the ‘global.’ On the other hand, the contributors to this collection have equally engaged with more abstract notions of space as an organizing principle and a heuristic tool. Yet we do not wish to suggest that these two senses of space should be kept apart, or that one of them should be privileged. Quite the contrary, it is often times a creative appreciation of both these dimensions which makes for the most fruitful and convincing spatial readings, as the articles that follow epitomize.

In the remainder of this introduction, we briefly introduce the five articles that comprise the heart of this special issue on ‘Conceptions of Space in Intellectual History.’ While each piece constitutes a convincing contribution in its own right, we have grouped the articles under

¹⁹ See e.g. Bain (ed.), *The Medieval Foundations of International Relations*; Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace*; Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*; Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism*; Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*; Bell, *Reordering the World*; Pitts, *Boundaries of the International*.

²⁰ See e.g. Subrahmanyam, “Beyond the Usual Suspects.”

²¹ Benton and Clulow, “Webs of Protection and Interpolity Zones in the Early Modern World”; Benton and Clulow, *Interpolity Law*.

²² Mulsow, “A Reference Theory of Globalized Ideas.”

²³ Elden, *The Birth of Territory*; Brett, *Changes of State*.

²⁴ Becker, “Gender in the History of Early Modern Political Thought.”

three broad headings – territory, oceans and empire, and geopolitics – so as to map out one possible route through the special issue. As Lauren Benton’s excellent afterword to this volume epitomizes, this does not, of course, exhaust the ways in which these richly textured studies can be brought into dialogue.

2. Territory

The first two contributions to this issue present new ways of contextualizing thinkers and, in so doing, they highlight the crucial importance each assigned to the arena or place in which political action occurs. These articles do not seek to explore the conceptual genealogy of ‘territory’, as Elden has recently done; rather, both contributors reconstruct how historical thinkers engaged with conceptions of the modern territorial state and tried to put forth specific justifications or criticisms of it.²⁵ As such, though covering different time-periods and debates, both authors emphasize the importance of reconstructing the links between the location and justification of the state’s power as crucial to recovering the political thought of the past.

In the first article, Benjamin Mueser revisits the writings of the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel in light of recent work on the overlap between apologies and critiques of empire and the importance of these to debates concerning the territorial claims of states in Europe.²⁶ By doing so, Mueser shows that Vattel drew on many sources in order to shield the territorial claims of small European states from the kinds of criticism aimed at imperial territorial acquisition. Specifically, the author explores how Vattel employed the different definitions of ‘use’ of land made by John Locke and Christian Wolff to distinguish between possession of land and territorial right. Though Vattel’s initial account drew on Locke and justified the possession of land in terms of agricultural use, Vattel also followed Wolff in viewing ‘use’ as having a broader meaning, one that could include a variety of aims and uses of the land. It thus becomes clear that the former conception of use justified *dominium* and property but not *imperium* (jurisdiction), whereas the second, in justifying both, elevated territory and territorial right to a different level.²⁷

In uncovering these conceptual moves, Mueser shows that Vattel’s justification of territorial rights was grounded in the idea of the nation as a pre-existing collective entity capable of envisaging many different uses of the land in pursuit of its perfectibility and

²⁵ Elden, *The Birth of Territory*.

²⁶ Pagden, *Lords of all the World*, Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property, and Empire*, Armitage, *The ideological Origins of the British Empire*.

²⁷ Mueser, ‘The Nation and Property in Vattel’s Theory of Territory’, 19-20, 24.

happiness. Territory was ‘a unique juridical zone, which becomes the sovereign territory within which the nation seeks self-perfection and happiness’ and constituted the nation’s rightful native country.²⁸ As such, the territorial rights of the native country were justified in a manner different from land acquired through imperial expansion and were not vulnerable to the critiques aimed at the latter.

António Ferraz de Oliveira approaches the issue of territory a bit more obliquely. His primary aim is to bring a new interpretive lens to the study of the Russian philosopher and socialist Peter Kropotkin. In place of historians’ long-standing focus on the tension between science and politics, Ferraz de Oliveira shows that Kropotkin’s revolutionary thought was profoundly influenced by his engagement with some of the main *historical* narratives of his time. Chief among these were the liberal narratives of the romantic historian Augustin Thierry and the historical-evolutionist approach of Henry James Sumner Maine, one of the most influential figures in evolutionary thought in the nineteenth century. The focus and stakes of this engagement were set by Kropotkin’s refashioning of the Commune, ‘a key concept for thinking the political geography of a social revolution in Europe’, as an alternative to the monarchical territorial state.²⁹

Kropotkin’s reformulation subverted existing narratives that cast the downfall of the medieval or primitive commune as positive events that eventually led to the modern territorial state. In doing so, Kropotkin instead presented narratives that highlighted the political viability and superiority of the commune as a way of organising and extending liberty and solidarity. In tracing these conceptual moves, this article also illustrates the aforementioned overlap of temporal and spatial lenses for the study of the history of political thought, thereby offering yet another example of the importance of considering space, even a more ‘hard-edge’ space, as a key component of an author’s political reflections alongside time.

3. Oceans and Empire

A second set of articles in this special issue revolves around the nexus of oceans and empire, a theme which has received much scholarly attention in recent years. Historians have excavated past visions of the ‘ocean as an uneven legal space ... of imperfect control’³⁰, they have highlighted the ‘terraqueous’ nature of oceanic waters as ‘definable and bounded space that

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ferraz de Oliveira, ‘Kropotkin’s Commune and the Politics of History’, 2.

³⁰ Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*, 108.

might be possessed, like land'³¹, and they have equally pointed to the centrality of 'European maritime empires as drivers and conduits of world history'³². The articles by Matilde Cazzola and Giuseppe Grieco fit well with this turn to the role of oceans in world history more broadly speaking, and provide innovative approaches from the perspective of the history of political thought. At the heart of both pieces is the interface of oceanic waters and the British Empire around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Matilde Cazzola homes in on the conceptions of space and power that the British theorist and colonial governor for the Americas, Thomas Pownall, elaborated. Her central argument is that Pownall's writings from before and after the American Revolution – though very different in emphasis, outlook, and argument – share a common conceptual core. The key to making sense of Pownall's thought, Cazzola notes, lies in an appreciation of his intricate understanding of politics in terms of 'spatial assemblages.'³³ As opposed to fixed territories, Pownall's spaces of politics are constituted by a gravitational force that draws power towards property – a force that is natural in a Newtonian sense and cannot therefore be manipulated by humans. For Pownall, shifts in the distribution of property necessarily lead to shifts in political power, too. Against this backdrop, Cazzola fascinatingly traces how Pownall reoriented his political outlook multiple times, in accordance with how he conceived the rapidly changing power relations between the rising United States and their former mother country.

While focusing on Pownall's own understanding of space, it is important to note that Cazzola also takes her cue from the intellectual historians Carlo Galli and Raffaele Laudani, for whom 'the true laboratory of modern political thought is located not in Europe but in the space in between the metropole and the colony.'³⁴ Accordingly, Cazzola's story culminates with Pownall's account of 'the Atlantic as an alternative space to European continental order'³⁵ in the early nineteenth century, which was 'shaped by the dynamism of trade' and above all characterized by 'informal commercial control'³⁶. In this latter sense, Cazzola's engagement with Pownall also provides a fresh and novel perspective on recent debates in intellectual history that have centred on the interplay of property, political power, and empire.³⁷

³¹ Bashford, "Terraqueous Histories," 261.

³² Armitage, Bashford, and Sivasundaram, "Introduction," 4.

³³ Cazzola, "Space as a Gravitational Field," 3.

³⁴ Sitze, "Foreword," xxii. See also Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War*, 17-20; and Laudani, *Disobedience in Western Political Thought*, 55-66.

³⁵ Cazzola, "Space as a Gravitational Field," 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire*; Koskenniemi, "Sovereignty, Property and Empire."

Giuseppe Grieco's contribution takes us into the Mediterranean, focusing on British and Southern Italian reflections on international order in the first decades of the nineteenth century. He unearths how Sicilian intellectuals invoked British political and military protection in order to escape what they perceived as the 'Bourbon oppression'³⁸ of Naples, while Neapolitan liberals, in contrast, feared British support of the Sicilian calls for autonomy and conceptualized 'the Mediterranean as a space of national self-determination'³⁹. In proposing an alternative model for international order that was 'based on national liberty and free commerce'⁴⁰ rather than British hegemonic control, the Neapolitans advocated novel political roles both for Britain and the Kingdom of Two Sicilies.

Grieco's multilayered approach echoes Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou's recent call for 'putting together histories that are usually examined individually'⁴¹. Grieco's principal aims are to foreground the active involvement of Neapolitan and Sicilian thinkers in debates about power and order in the Mediterranean, as well as to shed light on alternative visions of British suzerainty that differ from the views advocated by Britain's own imperial agents. In so doing, Grieco writes, the article engages and contributes to 'recent scholarship on empire, liberalism and international law.'⁴²

While neither Sicilian, Neapolitan, nor British thinkers envisaged the Mediterranean as a space of territorial-imperial expansion, Grieco's captivating story draws our attention to the intricacies and tensions that emerge when bringing these perspectives into dialogue with one another. The British claim to hegemonic control of the states and waters in the Mediterranean, for instance, was bound up with 'a geography of civilization' that clashed with the Neapolitan prospect of 'a cosmopolitan society of equal subjects and mutually recognized sovereign nations.'⁴³ Grieco's article thus adds novel facets to the 'long, strange history' of political and legal protection in imperial settings.⁴⁴ But above all, it makes a powerful case for approaching the Mediterranean as 'a place of intellectual communication.'⁴⁵

4. Geopolitics

³⁸ Grieco, "British Imperialism and Southern Liberalism," 10.

³⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ Isabella and Zanou, "Introduction," 2.

⁴² Grieco, "British Imperialism and Southern Liberalism," 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁴ The phrase is taken from the title of the introduction to Benton and Clulow (eds), *Protection and Empire: A Global History*.

⁴⁵ Isabella and Zanou, "Introduction," 3.

As the final and shortest section in the special issue, an article on ‘Geopolitics’ might evoke a sense of overheatedness. ‘Geopolitics’ is a topic that is in urgent need of historicization, as scholars have claimed, and it is prone to mythologizing. In a recent introduction to the concept, for example, the intellectual historian Klaus Dodds did not refrain from calling it an ‘intellectual poison’.⁴⁶ ‘It has been accused of being intellectually fraudulent, ideologically suspect, and tainted with associations with Nazism and fascism.’⁴⁷ A short conceptual history pays testimony to his observation. First coined by the Swedish author Rudolf Kjellen at the turn of the twentieth century, the term then migrated into German academic language. Originally, the term denoted ‘the role of territory and resources in shaping the condition of states.’⁴⁸ And as it stands, such a notorious genealogy might invite a certain dismissal.

That, however, is far from the approach taken by Luna Sabastian in her piece on ‘Spaces on the Temporal Move’, the last essay in this special issue. Sabastian investigates the intellectual nexus between Indian and German theorists of international relations in the interwar period. Focusing on the infamous German scholar Karl Haushofer – often cited as a source of inspiration for Hitler himself – and the Indian academic Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Sabastian looks for the curious convergence of anti-colonial Indian thought in the interwar era and Nazi discourses of ‘geopolitical’ emancipation. Expectedly, Sabastian’s piece focalises on concepts such as ‘empire’, ‘race’ and ‘Lebensraum’. The most interesting of her observations, however, do not necessarily bear on these canonical topics in twentieth-century international thought. Rather, it is in the *spatial* vista of her work that allows us to tease out the most interesting contiguities between Indian and German modes of international thought. Both Indian and German thinkers, Sabastian claims, engaged on their own ‘spatial turn’, which ought to be ‘understood as an overdue rebuke of historicism, and therefore the primacy of time over space, in the study of history.’⁴⁹ What we today call the ‘spatial turn’, Sabastian claims, finds its curious antecedent in Sarkar and Haushofer’s celebration of ‘space’ as the prime organizing principle of political power, defined in opposition to teleological schemes of historical progress. More strongly, in her words, it was ‘a globalisation theory before the term, and before the bomb.’⁵⁰ Above all, Sabastian urges us to reconsider how we might work with ‘space’ both as a heuristic tool and as a theme in its own right. In her view, such an investigation must take into account the dialectical counterpart of every ‘spatial’ turn – in other words, the spatial writ

⁴⁶ See the heading of Chapter 2 of Dodds’s *Geopolitics*.

⁴⁷ Dodds, *Geopolitics*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Dodds, *Geopolitics*, 24.

⁴⁹ Sabastian, “Spaces on the Temporal Move,” 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

large might be joined by the temporal to widen its conceptual grip, as was already done by a previous generation of historians of political thought.⁵¹

These brief glimpses at the articles of this special issue reveal that the volume is decidedly open-ended and open-minded: it gathers together the work of scholars from a variety of academic cultures and disciplinary backgrounds, whose interests are dispersed across centuries and thematic fields. We believe that it is precisely this openness and diversity that will fruitfully open new vistas as to the ways in which intellectual historians might approach ‘space’ today.

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⁵¹ See above at endnote 17.

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