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## **'Political Geography and Political Science: Common Territory?'**

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### **Contested Statehood**

This Special Issue of *Geopolitics* on state building and contested statehood comes at an apposite time. As the editors note, a range of EU state building tools and frameworks in the Union's near abroad are now evident, including the Neighbourhood Policy, development of the Common Security and Defence Policy, and conditionality-related effects of Europeanization. All have experienced some form of political contestation. Moreover, profound questions now face the six-decade old project of European political integration as it confronts a surge in populist nationalism among its (currently) twenty-eight member states. This has left the process of European statebuilding in flux, buffeted by competing supranational, national and subnational political imperatives and often divisive European popular imaginaries.

Differences are also evident in how the disciplines of political science and political geography approach state building and statehood. As is often the case with cognate fields, there is a tendency among geographers and political scientists to overlook or prefer not to recognise the other's academic contributions because of the optics of one's own discipline. This, too, has been combined with a dismissal of geography as an 'importing' discipline (Johnston 2019) and the potential contributions of geographical scholarship to contemporary policy debates under-valued, even by the EU policy making system itself. Thus, in EU studies, International Relations (IR) has made the greatest strides in conceptualising formal state building processes and interactions across political-administrative scales, not least opening up new interdisciplinary foci such as Europeanization. Political geographers meanwhile have tended to problematise the state as a form of hegemonic spatial ordering, most recently by scrutinising the mundane politics of state building, statecraft and critical diplomacies. Lamentably, and despite its theoretical crispness and empirical rigour, this geographical work has not enjoyed a comparable level of traction in policy circles.

Consequently, this makes this Special Issue's goal of initiating a new cross-disciplinary dialogue on the EU's actorness, capabilities and presence beyond its borders all the more welcome. In their opening paper, the editors note that such cross-disciplinary dialogues have been "muted by both sides" in the past. One of the key reasons for this is different disciplinary conceptions of space, which is after all the keystone of European state-building. The last two decades have seen frequent assertions that space is obvious "common ground" (O'Loughlin 2000, 135) for closer disciplinary engagement, but this has proved problematic. As we have noted elsewhere, there are a number of reasons for this (Clark and Jones 2013). Among political geographers, the toxic intellectual legacy of formal geopolitics has meant "What political geographers and International Relations (IR) scholars are currently writing [on space]...continues to display a chasm in terms of the theoretical and

conceptual frameworks and semantics being used” (Murphy et al., 2004, 627–628). For political scientists meanwhile, “...the messiness of a world of regions that is constantly in the process of being reshaped and redefined by internal and external forces lacks appeal” (O’Loughlin, 2000, 135).

Notwithstanding these issues, some cross-disciplinary interaction on space and state-building is evident. In one (admittedly exceptional) instance, this has resulted in some reformulation of views in IR on territory’s importance to state political authority (Agnew, 1994). The last decade has also seen initiatives emerging in ‘critical’ IR (that is, work that challenges realism’s assumptions, namely the study of interstate relations in isolation from other social forces), including new materialist approaches to military technologies and the state (Bousquet 2017), collaborative work on state sovereignties (Biersteker and Weber, 1996), and examination of the spatialities of political ideologies (Deudney, 2008). More pertinently, some political scientists have begun to take up broad-brush geographical notions as a context for studies of political action – so-called ‘context-based’ research (e.g. Branch, 2011) – to reveal a deeper, more analytical and conceptually-driven interest in the politics of space.

Nonetheless, contradictory disciplinary conceptualizations of space bedevil cross-disciplinary initiatives of this sort. In political science, space is still essentially viewed as a uniform, featureless medium upon which human political action is played out. Consequently, in explaining political behaviour (e.g. the ‘neighbourhood effect’ in electoral geography) the historical-geographical qualities of space routinely examined by geographers are invariably stripped out of analyses (Johnston, 2009; 2019). Particularly in mainstream IR, space also has normative associations with state-building and connotations of modernity.

### State Building and Territory

There is a yawning gap between political science’s acknowledging geography *per se* as a context for political action, and geographers’ claims that the constitution of space is in and of itself a political act. Geography’s long tradition of a phenomenological understanding of space always emphasised its socially constructed nature. This understanding was radically transformed by Soja’s (1989) magisterial analysis that reconceptualised space as arising from quotidian socio-economic embedded practices of actors orchestrated through the central organising logic of global capitalism. Subsequently, spatial appropriations of post-structural philosophy by geographers have explored how practices of individuals, organisations and states reconfigure space for explicitly political purposes. That is, space is itself an arena and a resource for political effect (Jessop et al., 2008, Clark and Jones, 2011, Jones and Clark 2013). Outside the critical IR fold, this post-structural approach to space (notably shared with other social sciences, e.g. sociology, anthropology) is largely unacknowledged by political science.

All this is directly relevant to questions of the EU, state-building and contested statehood addressed in this Special Issue. For political geographers, the EU is a particular form of supranational political space that is continually remade by a constellation of geopolitical interests. Rather than space being an empty container animated by state power, it is an inherently political resource, rendered meaningful through state, organizational and individual social acts and practices that are conditioned by particular spatial imaginaries. Not least, EUrope’s contested state building processes

emerge as constantly iterated political struggles over spatial practices and imaginaries among actors at multiple political scales. Some of these work at the behest of EU member states, while others are directly linked to supranational EU policy imperatives. Crucially however, alternatives exist to these hegemonic EUropean visions, imaginaries and practices of state-building (Clark and Jones 2008). These reconfigure EUrope's state-building initiatives – be they multiple overlapping city regions, Neighbourhood and Association Agreement designations, or trans-frontier corridors such as INTERREG – into a bewildering variety of polymorphous and polysemous forms (Deas and Lord 2006).

### Actorness, presence and the Near Abroad

Without doubt, IR and Political Science conceptualisations have dominated debates on contested statehood, EU actorness and the projection of 'EU'rope beyond its borders. The geopolitical imaginations that categorise 'Near Abroad', and which critically underpin EU actions there, have been sadly overlooked in much political science discussion of EU actorness. It is worth reiterating that important work by political geographers over the last decade has specifically explored the struggles over spatial practices and spatial imaginaries that underpin EU external actions in the Near Abroad (Jones 2006, Bachmann 2011, Bialasiewicz 2011, Jones and Clark 2008; 2013). This geographical work has explicitly shown how spatial imaginaries are a powerful geopolitical practice for EU border expansion and crisis management. Spatial imaginaries are central to the political construction of spaces in which the EU regards itself as having a natural legitimacy to act in order to ensure its own security, promote good neighbourliness, and stave off potential threats to European and global order. In this way, the centrality of norms, values and rules crystallise into the framing of the EU as a normative power, with Europe's others being conditionally oriented to remake themselves in Europe's own image through a range of trade, aid and financial inducements.

This Special Issue has focussed on a wide range of case studies to explore the spatio-temporalities of EU state-building efforts. These probative examples usefully highlight the diversity of tools, structures and policy templates by which the EU endeavours to self-project externally, be it in the Former Yugoslavia, Ukraine or the southern and eastern Mediterranean (see, for example, the paper by Dobrescu and Schumacher on EU actorness in Georgia, and that by Noutcheva on its efforts in Kosovo, Abkhazia and Western Sahara in this Special Issue). Moreover, they expose the geographical imaginations that are deployed politically to bring countries and regions into the EU's orbit. These geographical conceptions of territory and space are critical to the discussion of contested statehood and vital to understanding the mobilisation of EU state building efforts.

The precise, albeit varied, nature of EU agency in processes of state building is a theme that emerges in many of the papers in this Special Issue. How the EU pressures outside countries and regions for them to become more like it, lies at the heart of its external actions. Mediterranean region building furnishes a high-order example of EU driven, spatially laden geopolitical process based increasingly upon this pressured conditionality. Indeed, since the 1950s the EU has attempted to construct symbolically, territorially and institutionally a 'Mediterranean region' as a space for EU action, from the Association Agreements of the 1960s (with states such as Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, Greece and Turkey), to the Barcelona Process of 1995, to the Union for the Mediterranean launched in 2008. These constructions of Mediterranean space by the EU have involved various spatial depictions

including an emphasis on its supposed geopolitical and geo-cultural chasms, and its 'unsettled' nature with potentially adverse consequences for EU security. Such imaginations reflect an essentialized understanding of the Mediterranean, seen as a space that, beyond the contingent heterogeneity of its economic, political and cultural processes, can be 'returned' to a 'natural' historical and geographical continuity (Giaccaria and Minca 2010).

These spatial narratives have necessitated strenuous political and diplomatic efforts on the part of the EU to maintain their dominant meanings, and in doing so to silence and marginalise alternative interpretations. The projection of the EU (by itself) as a 'force for good' has been met with all manner of contestation, as well as judicious political handling and leverage by non-EU states (and non-state actors) at a number of political and territorial scales (see, for example, the paper by Kyris on Northern Cyprus and that by Maass on Ukraine in this Special Issue). Moreover, the EU's treatment of territory and space as essentially isotropic and planar- an abstract, uniform, featureless medium, upon which human political agency is conducted is highly problematic. A number of the papers in this Special Issue specifically raise these concerns. Additionally, and no less significant, a number of other submissions also expose how the EU has attempted to legitimize its statebuilding activities through ideal constructions of the EU's past, present and future selves as spatio-temporal practices (see, for example, the paper by Cebeci in this Special Issue). Here, as Cebeci rightly observes, the intention is to continuously [re] produce spatial distinction between a peaceful European project and its conflictual others. Critically, what these papers expose is how the European ideal has always been anchored to the making and claiming of space. Indeed, space is both a site for the delimitation of the European self, and for the extension and projection of Europeanness beyond Europe's shores.

In sum, modern geographical imaginaries underpin EU external action. Recognition, labelling, and cultural ascriptions are intrinsic to the construction of EU identity and that of 'its others'. The translation of these imaginaries into durable socio-spatial constructions which influence political agency and its orientation is central to EU external policies. Specifically, we need to progress understandings of how these imaginaries work to define and enable, and to silence and exclude political agency and how this is institutionalized at EU and State levels. In this way, the analytical common ground is on how social spaces (for EU external actions) are premised on relational distinctions, power hierarchies and discursively based relationships. Thus, at the core of Europe's geopolitical imaginary lies the idea of Europe itself, what Europe is and what being European represents. Importantly, the papers in this Special Issue show convincingly how the European geopolitical project is a dynamic extension of European order beyond its borders, and one that encourages the imaginative reconceptualization of space. Cumulatively, they demonstrate the underlying geo-spatial rationales, instruments, processes and outcomes of EU external actions in contexts as diverse as Palestine, Northern Cyprus, Kosovo and Georgia. As such, therefore, the Special Issue's focus on contested statehood and the EU is both germane and timely in reasserting 'common ground' for interdisciplinary engagement.

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