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# The Biopolitics of the Border

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# The Biopolitics of the Border

## **Abstract**

First a story about science. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the British ornithologist Henry Eliot Howard made a remarkable discovery. In a series of books culminating in his *Territory in Bird Life* of 1920, Howard described the instinct for the possession of "territory" that he had found in warblers and other birds. The drive to claim and defend a clearly bordered portion of the landscape, he argued, was the controlling factor in the birds' social life. Among other things, it regulated which males could breed, kept the population in balance with its resources, determined how the birds were spaced across the landscape, and explained why they sang.<sup>1</sup>

## **Keywords**

animals, nation, biology

## **Disciplines**

Agricultural and Resource Economics | Animal Sciences | Animal Studies | Biochemistry, Biophysics, and Structural Biology | Biodiversity | Biology

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Etienne Benson

## The Biopolitics of the Border

First a story about science. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the British ornithologist Henry Eliot Howard made a remarkable discovery. In a series of books culminating in his *Territory in Bird Life* of 1920, Howard described the instinct for the possession of “territory” that he had found in warblers and other birds. The drive to claim and defend a clearly bordered portion of the landscape, he argued, was the controlling factor in the birds’ social life. Among other things, it regulated which males could breed, kept the population in balance with its resources, determined how the birds were spaced across the landscape, and explained why they sang.<sup>1</sup>

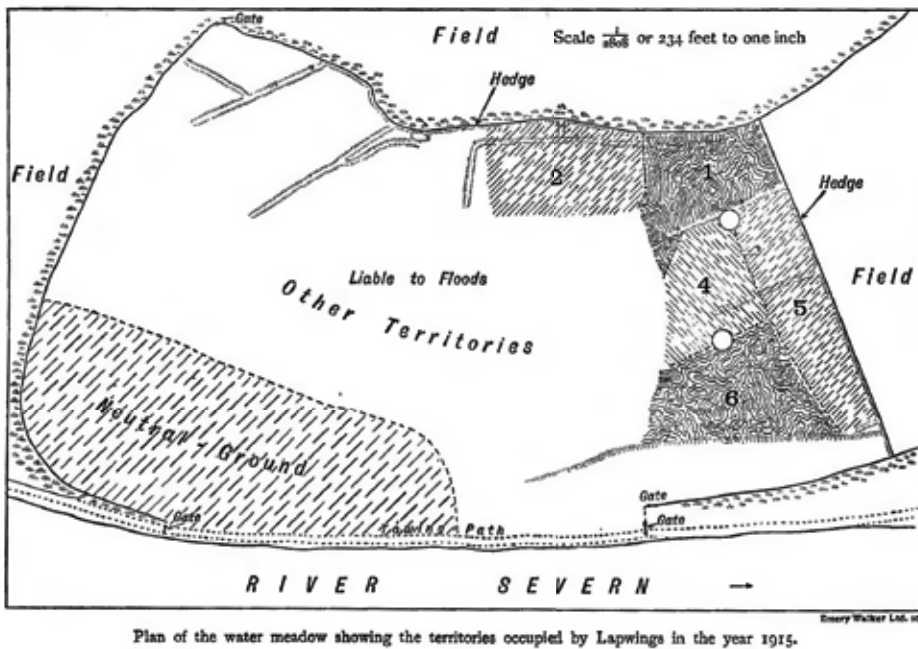


Figure 1:  
A map of the territories of male lapwings near Howard's home in 1915 that hints at the importance of human territorial boundaries. H. Eliot Howard, *Territory in Bird Life* (London: John Murray, 1920), 58–59.

Howard was not the first to make such claims, but his work had an impact far beyond that of his predecessors. Beginning in the 1920s, many biologists followed his lead in

1 H. Eliot Howard, *Territory in Bird Life* (London: J. Murray, 1920).

making territoriality a central problem of ethology and animal behaviour studies. By the early 1930s, the American ornithologist Margaret Morse Nice was warning that her colleagues were “in danger of going territory-mad”; by the 1960s, the danger had spread to mammalogists, ichthyologists, entomologists, primatologists, and anthropologists. Some of the lustre of territory would fade in the 1970s as new models of evolution demoted it from a dominant factor in animal social life to just one among many strategies for maximising individual fitness, but territory and territoriality would remain critical parts of the ethologist’s conceptual toolbox.<sup>2</sup>

Now for a story about politics. According to diplomatic historian Charles Maier, a new phase in the history of the territorial nation-state began in the 1860s; indeed, it was the first major transition in the international system since the Peace of Westphalia had established the modern principle of state sovereignty in 1648. In the late nineteenth century, states dramatically intensified their control of the land within their borders with the aid of such technologies as the railroad, the telegraph, and the census. No longer satisfied merely with extracting taxes from the territories under their control, they concentrated power in national administrations and took charge of defining and defending borders, promoting economic growth, and managing populations.<sup>3</sup>

This “territorial rescaling,” as Maier calls it, reached its apogee in the 1960s with the disintegration of European empires and the rise of nationalist independence movements. From the 1970s onward, however, liberalization of trade, the emergence of powerful non-state actors, and the multiplication of mechanisms for international governance challenged the power of the sovereign state. Nonetheless, even as its dominance was called into question, the territorial nation-state remained a powerful force into the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup>

The preceding narratives about science and politics have been presented as if there were no connection between them—no common border, one might say—but the coin-

- 2 Margaret Morse Nice, “The Theory of Territorialism and Its Development,” in *Fifty Years’ Progress of American Ornithology, 1833-1933*, eds. T.S. Palmer and Frank M. Chapman (Lancaster, PA: American Ornithological Union, 1933), 89–100, quoted in Richard W. Burkhardt, Jr., *Patterns of Behavior: Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and the Founding of Ethology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 94.
- 3 Charles S. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (2000): 807–31. See also James Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 4 Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

cidences in timing and in understandings of territory are difficult to ignore. Although biological research on animal territoriality began in earnest several decades after the beginning of the new geopolitical regime documented by Maier, both the study of biological territory and the growth of the territorial nation-state seem to have reached their peak in the 1960s and declined thereafter, or at least faced new and curiously similar challenges. They seem to be based, moreover, on a very similar model of territory. How are we to understand the resonances between such disparate fields?

Two common ways of answering this kind of question immediately suggest themselves. The first is to claim that biologists were simply projecting human concepts and biases onto the natural world. Maier relies on a version of this argument to explain the apparent resonances between ideas about force in politics and physics in the late nineteenth century; both politicians and scientists shared the “overarching spatial imagination” of their historical era. The causal arrow here runs from culture to nature. Biologists interpreted animal behaviour in terms of territories resembling those of modern nation-states because the concept was essential to the cultures of which they were a part. One can argue that Howard saw territory in bird life because he lived in a territorial nation-state, just as one can argue that Charles Darwin saw competition as natural because he was immersed in the competitive society of Victorian England.<sup>5</sup>

The second approach is to claim that similar concepts are used to explain human and animal behaviour because the two have common biological roots. This form of explanation has few adherents among historians, but it is popular in both academic and popular forms of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. The causal arrow here runs from nature to culture. Proponents face the challenge of accounting for changes in territorial behaviour over historical timescales, but the challenge is not insurmountable. The concept of territoriality has been proven flexible enough to encompass the tribal hunting ground as well as the modern nation-state, the area patrolled by a troop of chimpanzees as well as the defended nest of the stickleback fish. Historical changes may occur in the expression of territoriality without calling into question the fundamental constancy of the instinct. One can therefore argue that territory was central to diplomacy and to ethology in the twentieth century because it is central to the lives of humans and many other

5 Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History,” 818; Robert M. Young, “Malthus and the Evolutionists: The Common Context of Biological and Social Theory,” *Past & Present* 43 (1969): 109–45.

kinds of animals. It simply took the flourishing of biological science in the twentieth century to make that fact clear.<sup>6</sup>

Different as these two forms of explanation are, they both emerge from the same matrix of modern critique; they are the flip-sides of the same critical coin. As Bruno Latour has argued, this form of critique begins by dividing the world into two parts, *nature* and *culture*. The drama of critical unmasking proceeds by showing how a phenomenon apparently belonging to one of these divisions of reality is in fact determined by the other. What appears to be the biological fact of territory in bird life is in fact the cultural interpretation of animal behaviour in terms of the human concept of territory, while what appears to be the uniquely human institution of the nation-state is in fact the result of an ecological and evolutionary process common to birds and humans. Either of these mechanisms of critique would grind to a halt without the possibility of escaping to the other side of the nature/culture divide.<sup>7</sup>

The debates over evolution and human nature that have gone on almost without pause since the sociobiology controversies of the 1970s—indeed, since Darwin’s time—have shown to what stalemates that dichotomy can lead. But if we refuse to base our critique on the division of reality into the natural and the cultural, what is left to say about the mysterious resonance between understandings of animal behaviour and the structure of human politics with which we started? We can no longer be satisfied with revealing that territoriality is “merely” cultural or “merely” natural, nor do I think that can we cut the Gordian knot by claiming that it is a hybrid of nature and culture or a “natureculture.” If this division is an illusion, like the visual illusions of Gestalt psychology, there is little to gain by saying that we see both a duck and a rabbit, or both a biological and a cultural component of territoriality. Such a response simply restates in the mode of ambivalence the division we are trying to do away with. To continue the visual metaphor, it fails to account for the emergence of the illusion itself or to explain why there are lines on the page in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

6 Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations* (New York: Atheneum, 1966); Dale Peterson and Richard Wrangham, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

7 Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

8 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

I think a more promising approach would combine a cultural history of science with an account of biological and ecological change over time. It would show how knowledge emerges within particular socio-ecological situations, helps to transform those situations, and thereby changes the conditions for the production of further knowledge. In the case of territoriality, rather than starting with the ideas of scientists or the organization of states, such an approach might instead start with humans and animals inhabiting a landscape together, competing and sometimes cooperating over the things they need and desire. When the politicians and scientists entered the story, they would do so as actors attempting to understand and to reorder the landscape and the relationships within it according to new principles, with the politicians focusing largely on the humans in the scene and the scientists largely on the nonhumans.<sup>9</sup>

But it would soon become clear that even this division of labour between human and nonhuman was tenuous at best. The politicians would be constantly worrying about the productivity of cows, the contagiousness of insect-borne diseases, and other biological matters, while the biologists would be worrying about economic development programs, border controls, and other political matters. Politics would turn out to have a lot to do with nature, and biology would turn out to have a lot to do with society. Science and politics would both be contributing to a system of knowledge and power—a biopolitical system, in Michel Foucault's sense—that governed human and animal lives in space and time. In the twentieth century an especially clear example can be found in the history of national parks and other protected areas, where political and biological concepts of territory were explicitly articulated with each other, but the range of potential examples is much broader.<sup>10</sup>

Focusing on the situations in which scientists, politicians, and other animals of various kinds found themselves at particular historical moments might shed new light on Howard's work on territory and on the concept's twentieth-century trajectory through science and politics. Born in 1873 in Worcestershire in England's West Midlands region, not far from the industrial centres of Birmingham and Worcester, Howard spent much

9 Susan Pearson and Mary Weismantel, "Does the Animal Exist? Toward a Theory of Social Life with Animals," in *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History*, ed. Dorothee Brantz (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 17–37.

10 Jane Carruthers, "National Parks, Civilization and Globalization," in *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, eds. Bernhard Gissibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper (New York: Berg-hahn, 2012), 256–65; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).



of his working life as the director of a major steelworks. As an amateur ornithologist, he carried out his observation of birds and their territories in his leisure time on the grounds around his house in the countryside near Stourport-on-Severn, while also making frequent visits to the birthplace of his wife in northwest Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

Under these circumstances, it takes no stretch of the imagination to guess that Howard would have been familiar not only with birds and their habits but also with the way humans had partitioned the landscape. He would have known how legal and diplomatic borders separated towns, counties, and countries, how fences, hedges, markers, and lines on the map demarcated private property, and how customary rights sometimes bolstered and sometimes undermined legal arrangements. He would have had ideas about how these human borders affected bird life, determining what kinds of food and shelter were available as well as the number and kind of predators. He would also have had some ideas about how the presence or absence of certain kinds of animals influenced the way humans understood and used particular parts of the landscape. He would have encountered the subjects of his research within a landscape that had already been thoroughly territorialised.

That little of this situated knowledge made it into Howard's written work is a sign of the power of the disciplinary divides separating the human and natural sciences. If it had, it might have made it clear that the resonance between theories of territory in bird life and the structure of the nation-state in the twentieth century was due neither solely to biologists' projection of human traits onto animals nor solely to the common biological roots of human and nonhuman animal behaviour, though both of these certainly played a role. It was also the result of the shared situation—all at once biological, ecological, social, cultural, political, and economic—in which humans and other animals found themselves and which was the necessary precondition for the production of any kind of knowledge whatsoever.

11 Richard Burkhardt, Jr., "Howard, Henry Eliot," *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2830905767.html> (accessed 29 May 2013); Burkhardt, *Patterns of Behavior*, 92–98.