

## Chapter Eight: Political Geography

### How is Space Politically Organized into States and Nations?

**Political geography** is the study of the political organization of the world. At the global scale, the world is divided into individual countries that political geographers call **states**; a state is a politically organized territory with a permanent population, a defined territory, and a government. States and their boundaries are a human creation.

**Territoriality**, the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area, is a central part of creating states. Closely related to territoriality is the concept of **sovereignty**, or having the last say (having control) over a territory—politically and militarily. Under international law, states are sovereign, and they have the right to defend their **territorial sovereignty** against incursion from other states.

Up until the mid-1600's, sovereignty was expressed over a people rather than a defined and bordered territory. A sovereign had subjects who followed rather than a defined space to rule. By the mid-1600's however, European states began to state clearly defined borders and guarantees of security. Accompanying this awareness of borders was the concept of **mercantilism**, which is the accumulation of colonies that serve to supply the mother country with raw material wealth or as a market in which to sell its goods. This new view of statehood led to the idea of territory as being fixed and exclusive of others. From its hearth in Europe, European colonizers spread the idea of the state throughout the entire world by 1900.

Even though *state* and *country* can be used interchangeably (state is preferred), the word *nation* is distinct. **Nation** is a culturally defined group of people with a shared past and a common future who relate to a territory and have political goals. Benedict Anderson defines the nations as an imagined community—imagined because you will never meet all of the people in your nation and community because, despite that fact, you see yourself as part of a collective. The **nation-state** is the ultimate goal of any nation; that is, where the nation fits the boundaries of the state perfectly. True nation-states are almost non-existent, as any state boundary is bound to include some who are not committed to the nation or exclude some who are committed to the nation. Thus, the nation-state is more a goal than a reality.

Nearly every state in the world is a **multinational state**, or a state with more than one nation inside its borders. Yugoslavia was never a nation, but rather a conglomeration of nations: Serbs, Croats, etc. When a nation stretches across borders and across states, the nation is called a **multistate nation**. Transylvania is an example of a multistate nation; it is a nation that is claimed by two states—Romania and Hungary. Some nations do not have a state to call their own; these are called **stateless nations**. An example of this could be the Palestinians, who are dispersed over several countries. The Kurds (20 million strong) live in an area called Kurdistan that covers parts of six states, most of which is in Turkey; the Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish government have a rocky relationship at best.

The nation-state model was spread during the era of **colonialism**, which occurred between the early 1500's and the early 1900's. During this time, European states such as Britain, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium conquered distant peoples and exercised ruthless control over them, exploiting them as a source of wealth. At the **Berlin Conference in 1884**, the colonial powers arbitrarily drew the boundaries of Africa. Once the colonial era ended after WWI, the boundaries drawn by the European powers remained. The colonial era was a double edged sword: While the colonial powers benefitted financially, the people of the colonies played a subservient role and were kept at an economic disadvantage. Since the early 1900's, the world economy has become an interdependent world economy; each country depends on other countries for various goods and services. Immanuel Wallerstein established a theory that breaks the world economy into a three-tiered structure: the core, periphery, and semi-periphery. The core and the periphery are not just places, but processes.

-**Core** processes incorporate higher levels of education, higher salaries, and more technology; core processes generate more wealth in the world economy. The US, Western Europe, and Japan would be included in this.

-**Periphery** processes incorporate lower levels of education, lower salaries and less technology—peripheral processes generate less wealth in the world economy. Africa, the Middle East, and Central America would be included in this grouping.

-**Semi-periphery** are places where core and periphery processes are both occurring; places that are exploited by the core but in turn exploit the periphery. By taking advantage of its cheap labor or lax environmental standards, the core exploits the periphery. The semi-periphery acts as a buffer between the core and periphery, preventing the polarization of the world into two extremes. An example would be China: The US, a core country, designs the products that the Chinese make for us at a cheap rate. In order to get the resources to cheaply manufacture the US designed products, China buys raw materials at a low price from poor periphery countries such as Nigeria. Other semi-periphery nations would be Mexico, Brazil, India.

### **How do States Spatially Organize Their Governments?**

The forces within the state that unify the people are called **centripetal forces**, and those that divide the people of a state are called **centrifugal forces**. The balance between these forces will determine whether the state will continue to exist.

One way states promote unification is by choosing a governmental structure that promotes nation-building and quells division within. Two governmental structures commonly found in the world are unitary and federal.

-**Unitary governments** are highly centralized, with the capital city serving as the focus of power. Any smaller nations within the state would be suppressed and controlled by the central government's authority; an example would be the Basques in Spain. The French government was divided into 90 *departments* whose representatives came to Paris, not to express regional concerns but to implement the policies of the central government in Paris.

-**Federal governments** organize state territory into regions, substates (states), provinces, or cantons. The regions have some control over matters, but not over other matters. The US government is an example of this; certain rights are given to states, such as the death penalty, and certain rights are given only to the central government, such as coining money. A **confederation** is a system in which the states retain the bulk of power; this is also known as **states rights**. In US history, there have been several occasions when states balked at federal directives; integration of schools would be an example. While the federal government said to integrate, several states resisted.

**Devolution** is the movement of power from the central government to regional governments within the state.

Sometimes this movement of power is permanent, and sometimes it is experimental.

-Many of Europe's devolutionary movements came from nations within a state that define themselves as distinct ethnically, linguistically, or religiously. For example, Czechoslovakia split into two separate countries: the Czech and Slovak republics. Even within the Slovak Republic, a Hungarian minority is demanding greater rights. In Great Britain, Scotland and Wales both have expressed concern that they do not benefit from being a part of an English dominated country and might be better off on their own.

-Economics can play a role in devolution as well. Catalonia, a region in Spain, has 17% of the Spanish population but produces 40% of Spain's exports. This causes some Catalonians to question its role in Spain. Italy and Brazil have had similar issues.

-Distance can also add to devolutionary movements. Many times, islands separate from the mainland state create devolutionary processes. Taiwan seceded from China; even some in Hawaii demand that Hawaii become its own country.

Electoral geographers examine how the spatial configuration of electoral districts and the voting patterns that emerge in particular elections reflect and influence social and political affairs. Political geographers study church affiliation, income level, ethnic background, education level, and other factors to learn why certain voters in a certain area voted the way they did. In the US Congress, the House of Representatives is based on **territorial representation**; each representative is elected from a territorially defined district. These districts are moved, or **reapportioned**, to reflect changes in population as noted by the census every ten years. For example, the 2000 census caused New York to lose two representatives and Georgia to gain two representatives. Sometimes the party in power draws new district lines to give their party's candidates an advantage; this is called **gerrymandering**. An example would be our Republican state legislature redrawing Nashville's 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, which is heavily Democratic, to include a large part of northern Cheatham County which is heavily Republican. Even though the needs of the two areas are vastly different, doing so would dilute Democratic voting strength and allow the district to elect a Republican.

### How are Boundaries Established, and Why do Boundary Disputes Occur?

A **boundary** between states is actually a vertical plane that cuts through the rocks below the ground and the airspace above, dividing one state territory from another. This can cause problems because resources might lie under one country, but be exploited by another; for example, oil lying under Iraq's surface could seep into Kuwaiti oil fields where it is pumped out.

Establishing a boundary typically involves four steps:

1. States **define** the boundary through a treaty-like, legal document in which actual points in the landscape are described, such as latitude and longitude.
2. Cartographers **delimit** the boundary by drawing on a map.
3. The two states can then **demarkate** the boundary by using steel posts, concrete pillars, fences, walls, or some other means to visibly mark the boundary on the ground.
4. Finally, the boundary is **administrated** to determine how the boundary will be maintained and how goods and people will cross the boundary.

-When boundaries are drawn using grid systems such as latitude and longitude, the boundaries are referred to as **geometric boundaries**. In North America, the 48<sup>th</sup> parallel divides the US from Canada. During the **Berlin Conference**, European powers used arbitrary reference points to establish much of Africa's boundaries.

-When natural, physical features are used to make a boundary, it is referred to as a **physical-political boundary (or natural political)**. The Rio Grande River boundary between the US and Mexico would be an example of this. Also, the Great Lakes form part of the border between the US and Canada.

Occasionally, the established border comes under question, creating a boundary dispute.

-**Definitional boundary disputes** focus on the legal language of the boundary agreement. For example, if a wide river is the boundary, fluctuations in the river level or direction could lead to complications in the boundary, especially if resources are involved.

-**Locational boundary disputes** center on the delimitation or demarcation of the boundary. For example, there is a locational boundary dispute between Tennessee and Georgia; the line was drawn in the early 1800's. Georgia maintains that the delimitation, or boundary drawing, was a mistake. As a result, Georgia is only a few hundred yards away from the Tennessee River and the precious water it could provide for Georgia's water shortage.

-**Operational boundary disputes** involve neighbors who differ over the way their border should function. For example, one side might want free movement of people between the borders but the other does not. This could also mean one side believing that the other side is not enforcing an agreed upon measure, such as one side fighting smuggling but the other side not.

-**Allocational boundary disputes** involve access to resources. A pool of oil might lie under the ocean floor where it is difficult to delimit a boundary. A river might cross a boundary, but the country on the upstream section of the river uses it all before it gets to the other country or state.

### How do Geopolitics and Critical Geopolitics Help Us Understand the World?

Geopolitics brings locational considerations, environmental contexts, territorial perspectives, and spatial assumptions to the fore.

The **German School** of geopolitics attempts to answer the question as to why certain states are powerful and how states become powerful. Friedrich Ratzel postulated that states are like a biological organism whose life cycle extends from birth through maturity, and ultimately decline and death. To prolong its existence, the state requires nourishment, and this nourishment comes from the acquisition of territories belonging to less powerful competitors. Territory is the state's essential, life-giving force. The Nazis used this theory to justify its territorial expansion in the 1930's.

The **British/American School** of geopolitics holds that a land-based power, and not a sea-based power, would ultimately rule the world. Thus arose the **Heartland Theory**, created by **Halford J. Mackinder**, which stated that the heart of Eurasia (Russia) contained a resource-rich, impregnable 'pivot area' that could project power outward. Later US policy focused on containing Russia from spreading out from this area. Another counter theory arose to dispute this; the **Rimland Theory** stated that domination of the coastal fringes of Eurasia would provide the base for world conquest.

Some say that the US has an 'us' (pro-democracy, independent, and free) vs. 'them' (those opposed to all that is good and decent) approach to geopolitics. During the Cold War, the US described itself as being the last hope of democracy and freedom against the dictatorial, communist Soviet Union. Now we hear how the US is fighting to protect freedom against the terrorists who are bent on destroying the American way of life through terror. It now appears as if the current geopolitical world order is one of **unilateralism** (one decision maker), with the US in a position of hard-power dominance and with allies of the US following rather than joining the political decision making process.

### **What are Supranational Organizations, and What is the Future of the State?**

**Supranational organizations** is a separate entity composed of three or more states that forge an association and form an administrative structure for mutual benefit and in pursuit of shared goals. In the world today there are dozens of such organizations. The United Nations (UN) is the largest and most influential, containing most of the world's countries. Others include the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. The UN has mobilized to help refugee crises, and has mustered military support to push back North Korea during the Korean War and Iraq in the Gulf War.

The European Union (EU) formed over a long period of time, but was formally established in 1992. In that time it has created a single currency, the Euro. As the Soviet Union and communist East Europe collapsed, the EU added some of those states as well. The EU sets economic and agricultural standards that are good for the whole sometimes at the expense of the individual state. For example, the EU has had to bail Greece out financially, much to the chagrin of Germany, the most powerful and economically responsible of the EU nations. Indeed, some Europeans are beginning to show as much attachment to the EU as a whole as to their own country.