

Introduction to Sovereignty and Space



An Opening Anecdote

Imagine you are a kid. You are walking or rolling down the sidewalk with your friend chatting and tossing a ball back and forth. Suddenly, the ball ricochets off your hand and drops behind a chain link fence that demarcates someone's private property. Your heart begins to panic as your mind runs through scenarios about the reaction of the homeowner should you find a way over the fence to retrieve the ball. Most people are friendly, but some are very territorial. Some people have giant dogs who are more than happy to chase off perceived invaders. Some people have weapons and are happy to do the same. Your mind searches through fuzzy notions of legal prohibitions and protections as you stare at your beloved ball.

This module explores changing conceptions of space across time and... space. One of the biggest challenges we might face in this endeavor is overcoming years of conditioning that have trained us to think not just through the lens of private property and fences on a local scale, but through the lens of nation states and border crossings on a global scale. In this module, we will need to do our best to set these ingrained notions of space aside and train our minds to not just let the ball go, but to let the fence and everything it represents go. Only then can we appreciate the many different ways we can coexist in different types of spaces today and in the years to come.

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Map of the world

Even today people have strikingly divergent ideas about the places we pass through, inhabit, and worship. Take the small-scale example of personal space, for instance. When people chat with one another, they tend to stand a certain distance apart, but this distance is arbitrary and often changes based on the relationship of the people involved or where those people are in the world. People in some countries are acclimated to standing close to one another while people from other countries might feel immense discomfort when sharing a tight space with another human.

If we expand our range of inquiry and explore not just the great variety of understandings of space in the present, but the much broader research sample of the human past, we find many more relationships with space. While this module focuses on large scales of space, the anecdotes above remain informative. We might not talk about how Chinese mariners lost their ball behind the walls of the Portuguese Fortaleza de Malaca in Southeast Asia, but we will talk about why the Portuguese constructed those walls and what they meant. We will explore ideas about the ownership and occupation of land, demarcation or claiming of space, the sharing of communal resources like commons or fishing grounds, and even human forays into the distant realms of outer space and the intangible realms of cyber space.

Overview of the Module

Welcome to unsovereign space. This module contains three main episodes that span approximately six-hundred years. The first episode takes us to an era of expanding maritime trade empires in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the seas surrounding China and Southeast Asia from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century. It focuses on three key trading powers, Ming Dynasty China, the Kingdom of Portugal, and the Dutch Republic, as well as the critical Southeast Asian entrepôt, or trading city, that bound them together, Melaka. It explores the invention and amalgamation of three supposed “systems” of interaction: the Chinese tributary system, the Portuguese *carreira* system, and the Dutch Westphalian system.

The second episode jumps forward to the nineteenth century, examining technologies for demarcating and claiming territory, and methods for justifying those claims in legal documents. It focuses on the Kingdom of Siam and its efforts to master drafting treaties and mapping territory to aid in its efforts to preserve and expand its territory and autonomy. The final episode takes one giant leap forward to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, exploring the less tangible spaces of the internet and extraterrestrial bodies and outer space. It also examines sharing, interdependence, and mutual responsibility in an era of a rapidly changing climate and a tense political situation.



Map of reservations in the United States, 2016

Whose Sovereignty? Whose Nation?

Did somebody say “sovereignty?” Let’s start there. This module is called “unsovereign space.” Sovereignty is usually defined as absolute power or control over one’s nation, polity, or territory, or, on the flip side, freedom from external control. For nation states today, that usually means full independence and autonomy, which usually comes with international recognition and membership to international organizations. Of course, the skeptic might point out that even officially recognized nations are subject to external pressures, like sanctions or embargoes. They might also point out that other nations, like the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Mohawk Nation, have struggled for sovereignty within American and Canadian nation states. On the whole, sovereignty is a relatively absolute term that fails to capture a murky reality. In this module, we will explore the depths of that murkiness as we turn sovereignty inside out. We will draw inspiration from anthropologist Audra Simpson and other inspiring scholars to dissect sovereignty and appreciate the many ways to imagine and share space.

Learning is a constructive and destructive process. When we learn, our goal is generally to expand our knowledge, but, contrary to what we might expect, the more knowledge we accumulate the less certainty we feel about the past. For example, when someone who attends a public school in the United States first learns about World War II, they might learn about United Kingdom Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s stand against the Luftwaffe’s Blitzkrieg in the Battle of Britain. They would probably come away from that lesson feeling rightfully high about the role Churchill played in the conflict. But, if they learn more about Churchill in a specialized course or through independent reading, they might come across his callous and racist policies that directly led to the untold suffering and death of millions during the Bengal Famine during the War. This would likely cause them to grow conflicted about Churchill’s legacy. As one learns more about someone or something, they discover complications and contradictions.



In a college classroom, one thing we often encounter is the unlearning moment, or the moment when we have to set preconceived notions aside to understand—or indeed feel more confused about—a topic on a different level. When learning about space, especially on a global scale, one of the most important things we need to accomplish is unlearning the nation state. This, of course, is a tall task. Nations have not only infiltrated our minds through Olympic ceremonies, pledges of allegiance, national currencies, national history courses, and other rituals, but they have even infiltrated our vocabularies, sneaking into words like “international,” “transnational,” “interstate,” and “nationality.”

You might have noticed, however, that terms like “international” and “nationality” have not appeared in other sections of this introduction. That is intentional. We will adopt these terms when we reach the point in history when they became relevant, but before that, we will do what we can to set this notion aside. Anachronisms, or things that appear outside the time and place in which they are used or understood, can confuse any history and blind us to many fascinating historical contingencies. We will need to “rescue history from the nation,” as historian Prasenjit Duara calls for in his famous monograph. It is a difficult task because we have grown up with and feel comfortable around nations, but it is necessary to undertake if we want to better understand the past and thereby open up possibilities for our future.



Person reading in library

Structure of the Following Lessons

As outlined above, this module contains three main episodes. Each episode is designed to take approximately three hours of in-class activities and three hours of reading and preparation outside of class. Each episode contains a background orientation reading of three- to five-thousand words, two or more primary source collections that can easily be divided to fit different schedules, a PowerPoint, and a description of in-class activities.

Each reading contains several big-picture questions to help guide readers. Here are some questions to keep in mind for the overarching module:

1. How have humans imagined, understood, and claimed space in the past? How have those ideas changed or remained the same today?
2. In the twenty-first century, when humanity faces mounting pressures on terrestrial and maritime spaces, as well as the resources contained in or below those spaces due to a changing climate and growing population, and when new spaces, like outer space and cyber space, complicate our calculus, how can lessons from the past help inspire solutions for the future? In the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., ‘where do we go from here?’



Globe

Timeline

Lesson 2:

- 1328 - Birth of the Hongwu Emperor, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty
- 1341 - Qadi Ibn Battuta travels to the Maldives
- 1344 - Birth of Iskandar Shah (Parameswara)
- 1368 - Establishment of the Ming Dynasty in China
- 1371 - Birth of Grand Admiral Zheng He
- 1394 - Birth of Dom Henrique of Portugal (Prince Henry)
- 1402 - Parameswara establishes the Sultanate of Melaka
- 1405 - First of the seven treasure voyages
- 1411 - Zheng He visits Melaka and enfeoffs Parameswara; Parameswara travels to Beijing to pay homage to the emperor
- 1415 - Portuguese conquest of Ceuta in present-day Morocco
- 1433 - Last of the seven treasure voyages
- 1453 - Birth of Afonso de Albuquerque
- 1509 - Beginning of the Governorship of Afonso de Albuquerque
- 1511 - Portuguese conquest of Melaka in present-day Malaysia, Tomé Pires travels to Asia
- 1583 - Birth of Huig de Groot (Hugo Grotius)
- 1584 - Birth of John Selden
- 1641 - Dutch conquest of Melaka
- 1644 - Fall of the Ming Dynasty, establishment of the Qing Dynasty in China
- 1648 - Peace of Westphalia ends the Thirty Years' War and Eighty Years' war and establishes new political boundaries in Europe and some measure of religious freedom

Lesson 3:

- 1804 - Birth of King Mongkut (Rama IV)
- 1822 - Birth of Chief Red Cloud
- 1826 - Siam and Britain sign the so-called Burney Treaty
- 1841 - Treaty of Nanking signed by the Qing Dynasty and British Empire, first major unequal treaty
- 1851 - Fort Laramie Treaty recognizes Lakota territory
- 1853 - Birth of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), last Siamese tributary mission reaches the Qing Dynasty capital of Beijing
- 1855 - Siam and Britain sign the Treaty of Friendship, or Bowring Treaty
- 1857 - The beginning of the First War of Indian Independence, or the Sepoy Rebellion
- 1858 - Birth of Prince Devawongse Varoprakar
- 1868 - Updated Fort Laramie Treaty temporary ends the fighting between Lakota and American soldiers

Lesson 3, cont.:

- 1871 - The British complete the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India
- 1876 - Beginning of the "Sioux War"
- 1884 - Beginning of the Berlin Conference and the so-called "Scramble for Africa"
- 1893 - George Curzon releases his article the Siamese Boundary Question
- 1897 - Birth of Plaek Phibunsongkhram
- 1909 - Siam and Britain sign another treaty
- 1919 - The end of WWI and the Treaty of Versailles bring the issue of decolonization to the forefront
- 1947 - Partition, and Indian and Pakistani independence

Lesson 4:

- 1895 - Birth of President William V.S. Tubman
- 1902 - Georges Méliès premiers the film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (A Trip to the Moon)
- 1918 - Birth of Katherine Johnson
- 1949 - Birth of Anita Borg
- 1955 - Birth of Tim Berners-Lee
- 1957 - The Soviet Union launches Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, into orbit
- 1958 - The United Nations establishes the "Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space"
- 1959 - Countries around the world sign the Antarctic Treaty
- 1963 - The Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States sign the Limited Test Ban Treaty
- 1966 - The Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) comes online
- 1968 - Garrett Hardin writes his "Tragedy of Freedom in a Commons" article
- 1969 - Apollo 11 reaches the Moon as the first humans walk on the surface of a planetary body besides Earth
- 1987 - Anita Borg starts the Systems mailing list
- 1989 - Tim Berners-Lee invents the World Wide Web
- 1991 - Congress passes the High-Performance Computing Act
- 1994 - The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) comes into force
- 1995 - Bill Gates Releases the "Internet Tidal Wave Memo," Netscape releases Netscape Navigator
- 1997 - Anita Borg founds the Institute for Women and Technology
- 2004 - Larry Page and Sergey Brin publish their letter on Google's initial public offering, Mark Zuckerberg founds Facebook

Glossary

Anachronism - Something that appears outside the time and place in which it would have been used or understood.

Carreira - A Portuguese "system" of government-regulated and -controlled trade that helped the Portuguese establish and maintain trading dominance in the Indian Ocean for a brief period in the sixteenth century.

Cartaz - A Portuguese protection pass issued to non-Portuguese trading vessels that helped Portugal gain revenue and protect trading interests.

Cartography - The science and art of mapmaking.

Contingency - An important concept in history that reminds us that events could have easily played out differently. It is important to not be blinded by what eventually happened when examining how events unfolded in the past.

Demarcation - Marking or delimiting a border or other type of boundary.

Dominion - Control over a territory or space. Also, the space that is controlled by an entity. The British used this term to describe territories that were under the British flag.

Doxx - A form of online harassment when users publish personal information of someone, like an address or ID number, in order to threaten or endanger them.

Enfeoffment - Supporting or legitimizing a ruler by investing them with power and authority. Under the tributary "system," this often involved the ritual exchange of goods and visits to respective capitals.

Entrepôt - A sizeable trade-oriented coastal city.

Extraterritoriality - The rough equivalent of diplomatic immunity where citizens of a certain, typically imperial, country were exempt from local adjudication.

Firewall - Software or program that controls and restricts communications between a local computer or network with a larger network, like the internet. It is sometimes also used as a generic term for censoring or filtering the internet as in the Great Firewall of China.

Geo-body - A term coined by historian Thongchai Winichakul that describes the physical territory and characteristics of a state, especially as articulated in the form of maps.

HTTP (Hypertext Transfer Protocol) - A protocol used for clients to access and interact with servers on the World Wide Web. HTTPS is the secure version of this protocol.

Ideology - A belief or belief system, like liberalism or communism.

Mercantilism - A term coined by the famous Scottish economist Adam Smith that describes a type of protectionism in international trade and exchange. Some historians describe the Kingdom of Portugal in the sixteenth century as a mercantilist power.

Metropole - An imperial or political center or heartland. In imperial relationships, it often means the colonizing country or its capital. Its opposite is the colony.

Most-Favored Nation - An article in a treaty that grants one side access to any privileges negotiated by a third party with the other signatory of the treaty. In other words, it usually grants the imperial power access to concessions negotiated by other countries.

Nation State - A specific type of state that spread in the nineteenth century. Its innovations include a mythic permanence rooted in history and ethnic congruence, borders and citizenship, and a standardized sovereignty.

Space - An area, expanse, or territory that people can pass through, occupy, or engage with. This is a broad term that has a much larger range than outer space.

Sovereignty - A problematic term that implies complete or exclusive authority or control over a nation, territory, or space. Terms like "overlapping sovereignty" and "tribal sovereignty," which appear in this module, contradict the "complete" and "exclusive" part of the definition.

TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol) - A communications protocol developed by ARPANET, or the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, that has become the standard format for packet-switching and server-client communication.

Territory - An area of land or earth. Sometimes people will use territory as a metaphor to speak about virtual, maritime, and outer space as well.

Glossary, cont.

Territoriality - A way that states or individuals, especially those with power, understand and control territory or land. It describes a colonizing system of understanding and ordering space that eliminates other relationships with space.

Tianxia - An ancient Chinese understanding of the globe that roughly translates as "all under heaven." Chinese emperors believed that they were part of an interconnected global order with the "Middle Kingdom," or China, at the center.

Tribute - A ritual gift given in exchange for recognition or protection.

Troll - Someone who harasses or severely criticizes someone online often with the benefit of anonymity.

Trope - A widely believed but overused figure of speech. It is similar to a cliché or stereotype.

Vassal - A subject or subordinate person or state. In the tributary system, vassal states were those that recognized their lower position in a hierarchy but expected protection from the states to which they were vassals.

Further Reading

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.

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