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Ordonhas Viseu Cardoso, R.

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The Poverty of Territorialism

by Andreas Faludi, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham/Northampton, MA, 2018, 179 pp., £63.00 (Hardback) ISBN-978-1-78897-360-1

Rodrigo V. Cardoso

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The Poverty of Territorialism, by Andreas Faludi, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham/Northampton, MA, 2018, 179 pp., £63.00 (Hardback) ISBN-978-1-78897-360-1

Europeans have a penchant for carving up new countries, drawing crude border lines over maps that correspond poorly with real identities and cultures on the ground. Colonial powers took up that task in Africa, Asia and the Middle East in the past, helping spawn decades of tension and conflict. That was the nature of 19th-century European imperialism. Even if, as Münkler (2007) suggests, older empires lacked precise boundaries and avoided spending resources on violent territorial occupation (and in that sense differed from nation-states), European colonial powers took a blunter approach to domination, which included enforcing borders and subdivisions. Once sufficient resources and technologies were in place, the British, Spanish or French overseas empires relied on strict control and clarity regarding the division of their territories.

Not all colonial endeavours were equal, however, and the Portuguese empire, starting from the late fifteenth century, is a case in point. Unlike their Spanish contemporaries, the Portuguese had little capacity or interest in going inland and controlling vast extensions of territory. Being a small country with a small population and an almost total absence of resources besides inventiveness, their empire was a 'liquid' one, "where the sea is no longer a boundary but the essential nexus of connection between the few support points on land; [the sea was] the *very body of the empire*." (Hespanha & Santos, 1993, p. 351).

This was an innovative notion of empire, based on managing sea routes and nodal relations rather than hegemony over the land. And it was borne out of necessity, as the global scale of Portuguese possessions was impossible to manage with a hierarchy of public servants and institutions. Therefore, the solution to govern the 'liquid empire' hinged on a mix of formal and informal structures, ad-hoc decision-making, and exploiting legal voids regarding the management of the sea. The empire was sustained by "the coexistence of multiple and diverse arrangements – municipalities, trading posts, captaincies, protectorates, dedicated treaties, all designed case by case – for equally multiple territories, according to the opportunities and intentions of each enterprise." (Hespanha & Santos, 1993, p. 353).

The metaphor of the sea as body of the empire, the preference for functional relations over territorial control, and the complex mix of governance structures, all reappear when reading the proposals by Andreas Faludi about how to reconceive Europe, the European Union and European planning in today's relational world. In 'The Poverty of Territorialism', Faludi is inspired by the period before European nation states designed their own borders (and, through that, their narratives of national identity), when relations between places were multi-scalar (cities, counties, regions) and multi-dimensional (commercial, legislative, dynastic, military). With other authors, most notably Jan Zielonka (2014), Faludi foresees that the solutions for the current dilemmas of European integration lie neither in a return to strict national borders nor in the creation of a federal super-state. In striking similarity to the liquid empire metaphor, Faludi wants to loosen notions of territory and sovereignty and move towards interconnectiveness and overlapping – if ever-changing – spheres of activity.

The book starts in an autobiographical mood, where Faludi, whose previous work will be familiar to most of his readers, explains how he reached his present position. He highlights his shift of interest from the *process* of planning to the *object* of planning – territories. The main impression conveyed in this part is one of growing disquiet about the limited possibilities of planning in the European context. Having been present at momentous occasions of European policymaking, Faludi is keenly aware of the gap between the promises and the actual delivery of planning.

The main culprit is territorialism, the way space is organized in well-bounded containers, their integrity duly protected by a "territorial-administrative complex" (Faludi, 2016) whose legitimacy derives from the democratic habit of voting in territorial constituencies. Faludi makes the case for and against territorialism, before moving into the intricacies of the European Union apparatus and the reasons why territorialism ensured "that European spatial planning did not live up to expectations" (p. 67). Thinking in terms of boxes-within-boxes, and exercising exclusive sovereignty over them, is prone to reduce the willingness to cooperate when larger

interests are at stake, and to break down problems that demand an overall, borderless view. Being keen on metaphors, Faludi may be aware of the Buddhist parable of the blind men and the elephant – by only touching one part, be it the side, the tusk or the tail, each man conceptualizes a different beast and is ready to swear on its true shape and features. But nobody takes account of the whole animal.

To understand the elephant, Faludi offers alternative views of a European Union without a territory, a series of overlapping spheres of activity and authority, defined in a pragmatic and provisional way according to the problems at hand. Countries would not disappear, but their borders would blur into each other and ‘outside’ interests would be included in ‘inside’ decisions and strategies. Actors of different types (cities, regions, nations, but also economic, infrastructural and industrial networks) would form functional units with a high level of freedom and distributed competences. Without central control, either in national capitals or in Brussels, the Union would operate as a “meta-governor” (p. 111) and ensure that basic principles of liberal values, openness, prevention of conflict, competitiveness and fairness were followed. Faludi proposes three metaphors to describe this Europe: an archipelago of islands in a sea of relations, ice floats changing shape and position over time, and a formation of swirling clouds.

For Faludi, territory functions at two levels. On the symbolic level (p. 25), it is an endowment of personality – be it the King or the People – to a place. On a pragmatic level (p. 34), territory – or rather ‘territoriality’, the *production of territory* – is a technology for political control. The latter raises the question whether technological changes can serve such control in ways closer to Faludi’s ideas. McAfee and Brynjolfsson (2017) note how digitalisation no longer favours the firm as a *monolith*, where value lay in owning stock and centralized control was necessary to conduct business. Now, successful firms follow the *platform* model, a decentralized availability of networked goods in an environment where the marginal costs of access, reproduction and distribution are near zero – new nodes of the network can be added, shifted or removed at any time and many actors can contribute. Seeing the production of territory as a political technology, I wonder whether a platform model can enable new and more flexible ways to ensure the management, oversight and interaction between spaces (think Brexit and the Irish border backstop!). The role of technology begs the additional question whether developments in artificial intelligence can help manage Faludi’s overlapping, morphing spheres of activity, considering that planners (as well as their political masters) have little chance of overseeing all this complexity (p. 128).

What about the symbolic dimension of territory? The functional spaces proposed by Faludi are fragile and ephemeral constructs, hardly perceived by people as meaningful sources of commonality. Can the public, eager for comfort, security, sense of belonging and loyalty, be supportive of non-territorial solutions? This question, essential for the issue of implementation, is where the argument gets a bit thinner. Faludi is clear that he does not have a blueprint for this kind of future, and all we can do is to face uncertainty with some degree of confidence (p. 151). But the difficulties are immense, and not only technical – be it constitutional change, administrative reform, or a new planning structure and mindset. It is also about uprooting people and their sense of belonging, the personal stake that brings them to the voting booth. New incentives for political engagement would have to be found.

There is, interestingly, recent research about scalar changes in place attachment of people regularly interacting with different cities in which they live, work, study or meet. As a result, they develop what has been called a ‘metropolitan attachment’ (Kübler, 2018), where they feel involved in the challenges and fortunes of more than one place, and could, for instance, demand voting rights in several municipalities. Never mind the uproar caused by UK Prime Minister’s Theresa May’s blatant description of ‘citizens of nowhere’ in 2016: these new forms of multiple emotional attachments, if made operative by policymakers, could be a way forward to realize Faludi’s vision.

Nevertheless, we must also consider how the history of habits, uses and regulations becomes physically embedded in the territory. For planners close to home, the critique of the export of Dutch planning concepts, such as ‘compact cities’ to the “totally contrary” (De Meulder, Schreurs, Cock, & Notteboom, 1999, p. 80) Flemish spatial structure comes to mind – locally shaped concepts have not always travelled well through the long history of the European spatial mosaic. To make the networks operate as seamlessly as possible, we need to

know first what to do with all this material past. When Faludi argues that networks would “still be subject to the laws of the countries in which they operate” (p. 119) he may be neglecting this material dimension of territories and the extent to which they will produce resistance and friction, making the playing field quite rough.

Speaking favourably of the non-territorial approach, much of what is proposed is already there, as Faludi duly notes: cross-border cooperation frameworks, cohesion policy tools, sectoral agencies, and regional groupings based on shared geographic features rather than national borders. Faludi’s urgency is more in elevating these arrangements “to a governing principle” (p. 115) than inventing networks which do not exist yet. Similarly, he argues, so much in the daily practice of planners is already undermining territorialism – negotiation, compromise, coalition, advocacy – that their approach could also be elevated to a governing principle, if only it is acknowledged by their political masters.

Not wanting to overstate similarities between different historical moments, history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. Therefore, one can wonder again whether the Portuguese liquid empire of old harbours contains lessons for this story. Three key concepts appear in both: the metaphor of the sea as body and nexus, the focus on managing networks rather than delimiting territories, and the invention of a variety of site-specific governance arrangements in harmonious coexistence. The liquid empire was successful for its purposes for a long time, in terms of efficiency and flexibility; it could coexist and compete with other more traditional forms of governing space; and it was not planned according to a blueprint but shaped ‘on the fly’ by necessity and opportunity. But it was also fragile and easily preyed upon by other powers, not because central control collapsed but because the sea and the networks were, by definition, open and permeable. In a world filled with novel threats and new powerful actors rising, the agility, fluidity and ephemerality of de-territorialised relations is an asset as well as a risk. While returning regularly to planning, Faludi’s work is a fascinating exploration of this bigger picture and should be read by anyone interested in inspirational, fresh thinking about how we understand and relate to space.

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Rodrigo V. Cardoso
Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands

 r.o.v.cardoso@tudelft.nl

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