

Andrei Miroiu

**BOOK REVIEW:** THE CARTOGRAPHIC STATE. MAPS, TERRITORY AND THE ORIGINS OF SOVEREIGNTY BY **JORDAN BRANCH**. CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014, 242 PP. (CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS)

*Andrei Miroiu*  
Independent researcher  
andrei.miroiu@gmail.com

For a discipline so concerned with territory and the relation between political rulers and territory, International Relations (IR) has displayed remarkably little interest in cartography or the history of cartography. Scholars should be thankful to Jordan Branch for picking up the slack and bringing mapping and the history of cartography into the debates. This is surely a very ambitious book with sweeping theoretical implications, not only for IR but also for the history of political ideas and especially the theories of modern sovereignty. Branch's main argument concerns the creation of the modern territorial state and the transition from the medieval sovereignty of the personal bonds towards the modern sovereignty over a defined, measured, carefully surveyed, mapped and bordered land. While the process was secular, its origins can be traced to the revolution in cartography spanning the late Renaissance and the sixteenth century. Between the rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geographia* in 1406 and the general, fast and widespread adoption of the projection attributed to Gerardus Mercator in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, maps were transformed from simple illustrations accompanying written descriptions of cities, lands and itineraries to the objects we know today, defined by a focus on expanse (not on spaces) and centred anywhere (whereas medieval maps, at least in Western Christendom, were centred on Jerusalem).

Extrapolating the basic argument that maps shape people's understanding of the world, Branch suggests that, over a succession of generations, the power of the new cartography was such that by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional goals of statecraft, such as conquest, were redefined from capture of specific places towards the occupation of spaces defined by boundaries. This process involved generation after generation of decision makers in major Western European powers growing and being educated in an environment filled with books, eventually starting to use the maps for any political decision involving territory. As he puts it, "mapping is thus closely linked to societal norms and ideas: how mapmakers depict the world shape map users' view of the world." (36) It was impossible to represent on the new maps the medieval conceptions of power and territory, as these were connected with control over specific cities and fortresses and based on the personal oath of fealty. These maps reduced places, especially cities, to dots and focused on roads, geographical features and

especially borders, all in a framework of a rationalized equality of every represented point. Therefore, they suited better a conception of authority that did not emanate from the centre towards the other components of a certain polity, but focused firmly over control over a territory with definitive borders: “new forms of mapping in early modern Europe (...) reshaped ideas and practices of political authority, leading to a transformation in the nature of territoriality and the elimination of non-territorial authorities.” (68) The new maps and atlases, therefore, reinforced rulers’ belief in their supremacy over feudal lords and in time completely dealt away with non-territorially defined political structures, such as the power of the pope, the European city-states and eventually traditional empires.

Branch also makes the interesting case that “certain fundamental features of modern states and international politics originated in the actions of European polities and rulers outside Europe rather than within it.” (101) Essentially, he argues that the full-blown rational depictions of territory found in the new maps were first applied to settle international disputes in the New Indies. Afterwards (and presumably because of the success of these approaches), the policy of using maps to settle political authority over a certain space was applied inside Europe to the point of becoming – especially after the 1815 Congress of Vienna – the default approach.

There is much to praise in *The Cartographic State*. Foremost is the ambition to alter our understanding of the dynamics of the concepts of state and authority in early-modern Europe. The book teems with interesting ideas, new approaches and contemporary preoccupations, such as the final chapter – a fascinating speculation about the future of mapping in the digital and satellite-driven world.

But while the theoretical core and its implications are heavy, the execution is surprisingly light. Branch seems to like big statements, but supporting examples are hard to find in the pages of *The Cartographic State*. Throughout the book the author mentions the early modern European rulers living in map-filled environments shaping their ideas and lives but one fails to find a single extensive example illustrating this rather important statement for the economy of the book. Where one would expect to find a detailed discussion of how maps were increasingly used to settle disputes at peace congresses, one finds a two-three pages cursory narrative, devoid of who did what and when with a certain map. There is no indication whatsoever that the author considered the role of maps in the decisions that led to wars, which should be as important as peace congresses in our understanding of how conceptions of territory and sovereignty shifted over time. The book keeps many of the bold arguments required from a doctoral student in the tradition of the U.S. graduate school but contains little of the thorough research that is expected of a monograph published at this level.

Other reviewers (Black 2014) have pointed out that the research is entirely based on secondary sources, which is not entirely acceptable when many of the arguments are historical in nature. What this reviewer finds more disturbing is that Branch did not even consult original copies of the main atlases he repeatedly cites to illustrate his arguments. Indeed, Branch mentions that he only used the 2006 Taschen edition of Joan Blaeu’s *Atlas Maior* (79) and he only quotes Gerard Mercator’s 1595 atlas through a reproduction. Had he actually consulted these works he would have noticed that the editors of the modern editions have cut out (in the one volume edition) the written

descriptions of territory that accompanied each published map. Early modern atlases were not just collections of maps as Branch thinks (148-149), but had far more in common with their medieval ancestors in providing written descriptions of territories they also depicted visually (Mercator 1595; Blaeu 1650).

Another seriously problematic section is chapter 7, a case study of the surveying and mapping of France in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The author does not use primary sources and he also does not cite a single work in French. It is not sufficient to be acquainted with translated French historiography, for the simple reason that the agenda of translations is different from the breadth of a national historiography. It is surprising that the reviewers of such a prestigious collection as the Cambridge Studies in International Relations did not pick up this aspect. Also, when using secondary sources there is always the peril that one could choose old, out-dated or contested works. Branch falls in this trap when grounds many of his interpretations of medieval politics on the half-century old arguments of Kantorowicz or Strayer (26). Or, worse, one could pick secondary sources that argue in favour of ludicrous assertions, such as: “[t]he imposition of colonial practices in Poland required the demotion of the Polish people to the status of indigenous subjects of European colonial rule”. (115) Even a cursory examination of the history of Poland after 1772 would dissuade a scholar from making such a statement.

Another point of contention is that Branch cherry-picks his examples to illustrate specific theoretical points. While it is true that new mapping reinforced territorial understandings of sovereignty in the Americas, it had much less of an impact when we consider European contacts with Asia. Perhaps because in this case, up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was corporations rather than states that were the main players of European expansion. The Dutch East India Company or even the (English) East India Company up until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were interested in control over specific places, major nodes of international trade, rather than control over territory. Modern maps served these reasons just as well as similar maps served the reasons of Spain and Portugal in the Americas. As previously mentioned, Branch refrains from analysing the role of maps in shaping rulers’ decisions concerning war in early modern Europe. One of the reasons might be that these decisions had far more to do with a mix of medieval and modern motives such as – in the case of Louis XIV – the resurrection of old feudal claims coupled with the need for security and the desire for *la gloire* (Bluche 1986; Blanning 2008). While he acknowledges, following Teschke (2002), that medieval mindsets were still determining many war and peace choices even in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Branch does not thoroughly explain why rulers who had been brought up with the new maps and atlases took such a long time to succumb to their influence. Indeed, he covers his bases: “because generational turnover is a key element in major ideational shifts, it can take centuries for the social and political impact of even revolutionary technological developments to become clear” (168). But then it is hard to see why the cartographic revolution is more important than economic, military and ideological shifts for explaining the rise of the territorial state.

These flaws in execution are, unfortunately, too many and too irksome not to derail what is otherwise a very interesting and necessary effort. *The Cartographic State* is a badly cut gem. A gem nevertheless, but never a jewel.

## References

- Black, J. (2014). The Cartographic State: Maps, Territory, and the Origins of Sovereignty. By Jordan Branch. *Imago Mundi*, 66(2), pp. 254-255.
- Blaeu, Joan. (1650). *Le theatre du monde ou nouvel atlas. Seconde partie*, Amsterdam
- Blaeu, Joan. (2006). *Atlas maior of 1665*, ed. P C J van der Krogt, Los Angeles: Taschen
- Blanning, T. (2008). *The Pursuit of Glory: 1648–1815*. London: Penguin
- Bluche, F. (1986). *Louis XIV*. Paris: Fayard.
- Mercator, Gerardus. (1595). *Atlas minor*. Amsterdam
- Teschke, B. (2002). Theorizing the Westphalian system of states: international relations from absolutism to capitalism. *European Journal of International Relations*, 8(1), 5-48.