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Thinking through territoriality: introducing Claude Raffestin to Anglophone sociospatial theory

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Abstract. This introductory paper establishes the grounds for a more sustained discussion of Claude Raffestin's understanding of human territoriality in its contribution to contemporary geographical debates. The purpose is to highlight the broad, and fundamentally interrelated, philosophical, epistemological, and political ambitions of Raffestin's work, before elucidating some of the key conceptual pillars of his relational thinking through territoriality. In this, particular emphasis will be placed on the concept of mediation. The proposed engagement with Raffestin's work offers an opportunity not only for revisiting territoriality in its value for contemporary political geography and sociospatial theory, and for rethinking the positioning and contribution of Raffestin's oeuvre itself, but also for critically reflecting upon the spaces and power relationships of geographical knowledge production today and in the past.

Keywords: territoriality, Claude Raffestin, sociospatial theory, mediation, power

Introduction

"A 'geography of territoriality' takes into account the 'lived' [*le vécu*] through relations."⁽¹⁾
Raffestin (1977, page 134)

Claude Raffestin's understanding of human territoriality differs in ambition and perspective from established Anglophone literatures. In contrast to territoriality-aspatial-strategy approaches by Robert Sack (1986) and Torsten Malmberg (1980), amongst others, Raffestin understands human territoriality in strictly relational terms as the ensemble of mediated relationships linking individuals and/or social groups with exteriority and alterity, to increase their possible autonomy whilst taking into account the resources of the system (Raffestin, 1977, page 130; 1980, page 146). This relational posture is of critical importance, for it lays the ground on which Raffestin develops his theoretical thinking through key concepts such as power, mediation, information/energy, labour, and territory. It is also the very foundation of the wider philosophical, epistemological, and political ambitions of Raffestin's work.

Beautifully and provocatively written, Raffestin's conception of territoriality has been of great influence in Francophone, Italian, and South American geography. Ola Söderström and Chris Philo cite Raffestin's work as "the most substantial theoretical contribution to non-Anglophone social geography in the 1970s and 1980s" (Söderström and Philo, 2004, page 130). However, and largely because of the very limited number of his English writings, Raffestin's work has only recently begun to reach an Anglophone audience, through the work of Söderström (Söderström, 2007; Söderström and Philo, 2004), Juliet Fall (2007), Stuart Elden (2010), Elena Dell'Agnes (2008), and Francisco Klauser (2008). Raffestin's (1980) groundbreaking book *Pour une Géographie du Pouvoir* has not been translated into English, whereas it was published in Italy in 1981 and Brazil in 1993. Containing most of the theoretical concepts which Raffestin was concerned with developing and refining in the following three decades, this work

⁽¹⁾ Raffestin's quotes in this paper have all been translated by the author.

first systematically outlines the conceptual pillars of Raffestin's 'thinking through territoriality'.

Raffestin was born in 1936 in Paris and in 1950 moved to Geneva with his family, where he completed his school and university education. Between 1971 and 2000 he held a professorship in human geography at Geneva University. Raffestin's oeuvre sparked considerable conceptual reflection and research on professorial and professional levels across French-speaking Switzerland. It also inspired wide application in seminar works, diploma dissertations, and PhD theses, which, in turn, contributed to the operationalization of Raffestin's conception of territoriality from an empirical viewpoint.⁽²⁾

Reflecting the geographical situation of Geneva in the far southwestern corner of French-speaking Switzerland—bordering France and less than 100 kilometres from Italy—Raffestin's biography is shaped by three partly overlapping (Swiss, French, and Italian) academic and sociopolitical contexts.⁽³⁾ That Raffestin was writing in Switzerland is evident in many of his academic and nonacademic contributions, as he engages with a wide range of local, regional, and national sociopolitical debates. On the academic level Raffestin's advisory role within the Swiss National Science Foundation between 1989 and 2000, offering strategic oversight of research funding across the social sciences and humanities in Switzerland, needs emphasizing.

Writing mostly in French (albeit with notable exceptions in Italian), Raffestin was working at the very edge of the *école française de géographie*, both geographically and epistemologically speaking. His relation with French geography has not been an easy one, and his position towards its 'gate keepers' was often conflicting (Fall, 2012): *Pour une Géographie du Pouvoir* was met with vicious opposition by many French colleagues for reasons that will be made clear below. It is safe to assume that the critiques of the book, often personalized, influenced Raffestin's later work, which is riddled with hints against his critics and with accusations against Francophone geography more generally. Yet, despite this uneasy relationship, Raffestin's understanding of human territoriality has had an incontestable impact on conceptual debates in French geography (Orain, 2009; Tizon, 1996). Implicitly echoing Raffestin's relational approach, the 1992 French dictionary of geography *Les Mots de la Géographie* defines territoriality as "individual or collective link to territory, considered to be appropriated" (Brunet et al, 1992, page 481). The most recent *Dictionnaire de la Géographie*, edited by Jacques Lévy and Michel Lussault, quotes Raffestin's understanding of territoriality as the "expression of the multidimensionality of territorial being" [*la multidimensionalité du vécu territorial*"] (Lévy and Lussault, 2003, page 919). In passing, it is worth noting the relational and existential meaning of territoriality in Francophone geography.

Marginalized within, yet not completely omitted from, the canon of French geography, Raffestin has found more prominent reception in Italian theoretico-geographical debates. His proximity to Italian geography also finds expression on a personal level. Today Raffestin lives in Geneva and Turin. He is married to Mercedes Bresso, a major

⁽²⁾ It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of students' engagements with Raffestin's work. Three examples of diploma theses must suffice: Alberto Valsangiacomo's (1986) work on prison territoriality, Klauser's (2001) analysis of the sociospatial implications of CCTV on urban territoriality, and Baptiste de Coulon's (2004) application of Raffestin's thinking in the context of agriculture.

⁽³⁾ However, the conceptual sources of Raffestin's thinking reach far beyond the Italo-Franco-Suisse nucleus of his biography. For example, Raffestin was drawing heavily on French social theory, on Russian and Italian semiotics, and also on various other strands of European (and especially German) philosophy. More specifically, Raffestin's epistemological contributions in geography respond to French, Swiss, and Italian debates but also, in important ways, testify to his vast knowledge of the foundational texts of 19th-century German geography (by Humboldt, Ritter, and Ratzel, most notably).

political figure in the Turin region and Professor of Economics at the Polytechnic of Turin. Since the late 1970s Raffestin and Bresso have published several works together, amongst which the 1979 book *Travail, Espace, Pouvoir* is perhaps the most significant example (Raffestin and Bresso, 1979). As Claudio Minca (2012) shows, Raffestin's conceptualizations of *territorialità* and *territorializzazione* were of central importance in the reformulation of Italian geography in the 1980s and 1990s. Until very recently Raffestin has taught at the Polytechnic of Turin, and his latest book, on landscape (Raffestin, 2005a), was published exclusively in Italian [for a discussion of the book, see Minca (2012)].

Raffestin is also very prominently positioned in South American, especially Brazilian, geography (for example, see Becker, 1988; Saquet, 2009). Several translations of his work have been published in Portuguese and in Spanish since the early 1990s. More recent translations also appeared in German, Chinese, and Japanese.

Ambitions of the theme issue

This theme issue is devoted to introducing Raffestin's conceptualization of human territoriality to Anglophone political geography and sociospatial theory. Within this broad ambition three interrelated objectives can be identified.

First, the aim is to offer an alternative reading of human territoriality to relevant Anglophone conceptual debates and, following from this, to open up a space to revisit Raffestin's 'geography of territoriality' in its value as a substantial theoretical contribution to ongoing reflection on differing approaches to space, power, and sociospatial relations. At the very core of this endeavour lies the paper written by Raffestin himself (2012). Offering a self-reflective assessment of his work during the past three decades, Raffestin critically reflects upon the main sources of inspiration and the conceptual pillars of his approach. The interest in Raffestin's paper lies not in refuting other understandings of territoriality but in inciting a discussion about the complementarities and contrasts of differing approaches.

This consensual tone also marks Alexander Murphy's (2012) paper, which explores the circumstances in which Raffestin's relational 'thinking through territoriality' produces understandings and arrangements that can be effectively captured through territoriality-as-spatial-strategy approaches in the tradition of Sack (and vice versa). From this perspective Murphy's task for the theme issue is to reflect on Raffestin's position in, and potential contribution to, contemporary Anglo-American political-geographic work on territory and territoriality. Murphy's paper should be understood as an invitation for further debate in that it highlights a series of possible conversations between the two conceptual approaches represented in the discussion. In line with the theme issue's wider ambitions, Murphy also challenges the often taken for granted Anglophone understanding of what territoriality means and what it enables us to study.

This debate is highly important. Yet the reception of Raffestin's thinking must also bring to the fore its resonances and its dissonances with wider literatures in sociospatial theory. Raffestin (and Francophone geography more generally) attributes much broader meaning to the terms 'territory' and 'territoriality' than most Anglo-American geographers (Debarbieux, 1999).⁽⁴⁾ Raffestin's oeuvre thus also (and perhaps even more neatly) connects with literatures on 'relational space', 'place' (Massey, 2005), and 'spatiality', which are aiming to conceptualize sociospatial relations more broadly

⁽⁴⁾ Francophone and Anglo-American geography are internally heterogeneous and partly overlapping categories. For example, as Murphy (2012) shows, Raffestin's conception of territory is very close to that advanced in Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear's (1989) *The Power of Geography: How Territory Shapes Social Life*, where territory conveys the meaning of "humanly differentiated geographical space" (page 3).

than most Anglo-American work on territory and territoriality. This also raises an important issue of terminology, which shall be considered in the next section of this introduction with a view to exploring the basic ambitions of Raffestin's work.

The second aim of this collection is related more specifically to the positioning and interpretation of Raffestin's oeuvre, which has been received very selectively in different geographical communities. This point arises clearly from Minca's (2012) paper, where he deals with Raffestin's impact and 'travels' in Italian geography. Whilst Raffestin's theorization of territoriality, power, and space has left a deep mark on the ways in which geography is practised in Italy today, his pioneering and multifaceted philosophical reflections, incorporating a range of ideas from continental philosophy and social theory, remain to a large extent untouched.⁽⁵⁾ A similar conclusion can be drawn with regards to Raffestin's reception in Swiss, French, and Brazilian geography (Klauser, 2010a; 2010b). Raffestin's oeuvre was often met with admiration or opposition, yet the depth of his theoretico-philosophical project has still to be fully appreciated. The desire to open the door to such a discussion shines through all the papers in this theme issue.

Third, the reception of Raffestin's work also offers an opportunity for exchange between different language communities (most notably between Francophone, Italian, and Anglo-American circles). Following on from this, Raffestin's work serves as a useful frame for addressing a range of more general questions, from how knowledge is produced in geography to how different geographical traditions can be narrated and brought into dialogue. Both Minca and Fall are led by this third set of aims, situating Raffestin in his Italian (Minca, 2012) and Franco-Suisse (Fall, 2012) context, respectively. In these papers Minca and Fall elucidate the contingent imbrications of Raffestin's theoretical work with the places and people, institutional settings, and wider debates at the time. These elements of contextualization are essential for the task of revisiting Raffestin's oeuvre today. Furthermore, the ambitions motivating both papers also connect with wider debates on the 'power geographies of geography', stemming from a concern to critically question how situated geographical praxis works and how ideas travel and reconnect (or not) in different contexts and communities (cf Livingstone, 2005; Minca, 2000; Withers, 2007).

Aspirations of Raffestin's thinking through territoriality

In the following sections of this introduction I take up the task of establishing the grounds for a more sustained discussion of Raffestin's contribution to contemporary geographical debates. My purpose is to highlight the broad, and fundamentally inter-related, philosophical, epistemological, and political ambitions of Raffestin's work before elucidating some of the key conceptual pillars of his relational thinking through territoriality. This discussion aspires to set up a 'relevance framework' for assessing Raffestin's work today.

In Raffestin's thinking different inspirations, genealogies, and ambitions overlap and intertwine with each other, not only making up its very appeal for contemporary geography but also giving rise to a series of critical questions and tensions. Some of these are discussed here; others are highlighted in the papers of this theme issue.

Relational spatial ontology

Raffestin's thinking through territoriality is led by the intention to open the way for a geographical reflection on the relation between the human and the world. To cite Raffestin's reference to Martin Heidegger and Eric Dardel (Raffestin, 1989), a theory

⁽⁵⁾ The most substantial theoretical engagement with Raffestin's thinking can be found in Angelo Turco's work (Minca, 2012; Turco, 1988; 2010).

of territoriality is ultimately a “theory of the real” (Heidegger, 1977a [1954], page 162), based on the “geographicity of humankind [*géographicité de l’homme*], as a mode of its existence and destiny” (Dardel, 1952, pages 1–2).

Raffestin’s ambition thus goes far beyond Anglo-American readings of territoriality, which are concerned, predominantly, with the study of geopolitical strategies of control/defence of space and with the resulting political–territorial arrangements. The association of territoriality with politically bounded space in Anglo-American geography is such that, for some scholars, territoriality and relationality have come to be seen as opposites (Beaumont and Nicholls, 2007; McCann and Ward, 2010).

In contrast, Raffestin defines territoriality in strictly relational terms, consisting of the ensemble of mediated relationships of individuals or social groups to exteriority and alterity, on different social, spatial, and temporal scales (Raffestin, 1977, page 130; 1980, page 146). For Raffestin territoriality brings together the multidimensionality of social life from a relational perspective; or, in more philosophical terms, territoriality opens the way to a geographical ontology of human being-in-the-world (Raffestin, 1989, page 30). “At the very core of territoriality, there is the inescapable necessity of ‘dwelling’”, Raffestin (1995, page 91) writes, paraphrasing Heidegger.

In his quest for a relational spatial ontology Raffestin found important allies in philosophers such as Heidegger, Martin Buber, and Gaston Bachelard as well as major inspiration in critical social theory from Michel Foucault to Henri Lefebvre and from Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari to the semiologist writings of Louis Prieto, Roland Barthes, and Juri Lotman.

Defying easy classification, Raffestin’s original incorporation of ideas from continental philosophy and social theory into the discipline is of immediate interest for contemporary theoretical debates in geography and sociospatial theory. His combined readings of Heidegger, Lefebvre, Foucault, and Deleuze/Guattari (to name but a few) were truly pioneering in geography in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, still, the reception of Raffestin’s thinking offers a rare opportunity for productive dialogue between different theoretical strands in contemporary disciplinary debates. The aim of this theme issue is to pave the way for such a conversation by assessing (some of) the aspirations and inspirations of Raffestin’s thinking through territoriality.

At this point, however, I would like to recall the controversial reception of Raffestin’s philosophical project in the école de géographie française of the early 1980s. In several succinct book reviews of *Pour une Géographie du Pouvoir* by Yves Lacoste (1981), Paul Villeneuve (1982), and Paul Claval (1983), amongst others, “Raffestin’s ambition of establishing a theoretically informed geography was cast aside with a disparaging brush of the hand” (Fall, 2007, page 200). For his use of nongeographers, especially, Raffestin was accused of moving away not only from Paul Vidal de la Blache’s classic French geography but also from spatial analysis, cartographical approaches, and the predominant focus of many of his colleagues on state power. Indeed, this was precisely what Raffestin had in mind, as shall be shown below.

Reformulated human geography

At its very core Raffestin’s thinking also conveys a deep epistemological critique of human geography as a field of scientific research and praxis. Raffestin was a noted and early critic of the positivist turn in Francophone geography, and, notably, through his theorization of human territoriality (and territory) he aspired to redefine French geography in opposition to both the Vidalian tradition and spatial analysis, whose objectivist and essentializing approach of space he violently denounced (Raffestin, 1989, page 27). Instead, Raffestin was aiming to elaborate a reformulated, theoretically informed, geographical “programme of reflection” (Raffestin, 1986a, page 93), paving

the way to a relational refoundation of the discipline. Consequently, Raffestin advances two broad and insistent claims, directed at geography as a scientific field of research: (1) he repeatedly calls for a truly relational posture in human geography and (2) he strongly insists on the need for a unitary theoretical foundation as a “basis and unreachable horizon for the discipline” (Raffestin, quoted in Gillet, 2008, pages 28, 31, 289). Together, both claims have a strong impact on Raffestin’s approach and terminology.

With ‘space’ as a term and concept seized upon in the 1970s by many geographers as something external and opposed to society, Raffestin instead opts for the term ‘territory’ in order to stress the idea that space is not given, but socially appropriated, ‘territorialized’, as the object of social practice, knowledge (*connaissances*), and intentions.⁽⁶⁾ “Space becomes territory within any social relation of communication”, Raffestin (1980, page 133) states. This broad relational and processual understanding of territory testifies to Raffestin’s proximity to Lefebvre’s conceptualization of ‘social space’ (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]; Murphy, 2012; Raffestin, 2012). Moreover, Raffestin’s insistence on the processes of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization (TDR) as a way into the concept draws heavily upon Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology (Deleuze and Guattari, 1981 [1976]; Raffestin, 1984a; 2012).

“Deleuze et Guattari (1980, page 388) summarize in admirable fashion the process TDR: ‘the territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory. ... The marking of a territory is dimensional, but it is not a meter, it is a rhythm’” (Raffestin, 1984a, page 81).

The quote not only affords insight into the sources of Raffestin’s understanding of territory but also hints at the importance of ‘information’ in the territorialization of space. Raffestin conceives territory as ‘informed space’ (Raffestin, 1980).

In recent years this broad conceptual understanding of territory has come to be criticized as historically imprecise (Elden, 2010). This might be so, from a viewpoint centred on the historically informed meaning of the concept. However, to give full consideration to Raffestin’s contribution, his terminology must be seen as part of a broader philosophical, epistemological, and political project, grounded in the particular institutional and intellectual context of geography in the 1970s and 1980s. Minca (2012) and Fall (2012) both afford further insight into the genealogy and the Italo-Franco-Swiss context of Raffestin’s work, whilst Murphy (2012) adds a specifically Anglo-American viewpoint to this debate. The shared aim is to address, but also to move beyond, the specific issue of terminology in order to bring Raffestin’s actual messages and ambitions into constructive dialogue with contemporary debates in sociospatial theory and political geography.

Inevitably, Raffestin’s epistemological ambition also, crucially, shapes his understanding of territoriality as the very leitmotif of his thinking. For Raffestin (1986a) territoriality is conceived as a ‘relational paradigm’ that pushes for an epistemological change in the discipline’s posture.

“The basis for any general theory of human (and social) geography can be found nowhere else than in the conceptualisation of the practices and knowledge [*connaissances*] of social groups and consequently its subjects. These practices and knowledge are expressed as relationships to exteriority and alterity by means of mediators” (pages 91–92).

And, yet, Raffestin’s grand aspiration is not to develop a theory of territoriality as a ‘totality’ or ‘completed system’ (Raffestin, 1997, page 92–93); rather, his work conveys the ambition to reconnect disciplinary strands and thematic subfields into “a geography

⁽⁶⁾ I am grateful to Ola Söderström for highlighting this ‘strategic’ dimension of Raffestin’s terminological choice in a recent conversation.

without adjectives” (Raffestin, 1989, page 29). In this integrating epistemological posture, Raffestin’s appreciation and careful reading of Alexander von Humboldt, Carl Ritter, and Friedrich Ratzel is evident. Combined with his critical social theoretical ambition, Raffestin asks for a reflection on the possible theoretical foundations of a critical metageography (Minca, 2012). Strategically provocative and axiomatic at first sight, Raffestin knows very well, however, that this endeavour is necessarily heuristic in nature.

“It would be wrong to think that theory, at the start, should have anything else than heuristic value: It is enough for theory to indicate routes for bridging the islands of the archipelago [of knowledge]” (Raffestin, 1988, page 278).

Raffestin’s integrating posture and ambition is counterbalanced by his essayist style of writing. Raffestin’s oeuvre resembles a collection of interventionist essays, motivated often by frustration and dissatisfaction with existing work, rather than a complete grand theory. Minca (2012) calls Raffestin an “organic geographer” (page 147) in order to describe his ‘roaming’ search for theory and societal impact through contributions to very diverse fora. Raffestin himself expresses a similar thought in his beautiful 1997 interview entitled “Une géographie buissonnière” (geography off the beaten tracks).

“In doing geography, what I am interested in is venturing into under- or un-explored directions and finding novel forms of explanation, other ‘embryos of theory’. Perhaps, this is very ambitious or very arrogant, but I need to explore non-predominant paths. ... My work method resembles the way Seurat made his paintings, in successive touches. My successive touches are my articles” (1997, pages 89–90).

The metaphor of Georges Seurat’s pointillist paintings, besides standing for Raffestin’s interventionist style of writing, also expresses a second pair of contrapuntal qualities in his work: although roaming and essayist in orientation and style, Raffestin’s work is also, most importantly, characterized by its remarkably consistent theoretical structure and foundation. Raffestin never elaborated a ‘theory of territoriality’ in a single, synthesizing book. Yet his thinking through territoriality runs like Ariadne’s thread through his widely dispersed contributions, engaging with distant thematic and scientific debates. Raffestin’s labyrinth of writing resembles a meandering search in successive touches that are often provocative and exploratory, sometimes contrasting and discontinuous, and then at times gradually modulated, navigating around a number of conceptual centres of gravity. Together, these conceptual foci make up the composite portrait of Raffestin’s thinking through territoriality, as both the means and telos of his work for over three decades.

Everyday geography of power

Raffestin’s consistency in theory and approach is also intrinsically related to his concern for societal impact, which is the third broad aim of his work. Reaching far beyond the classic ‘terrain’ in the French tradition of geography, Raffestin has led a number of widespread geographical investigations into a range of issues, reaching from processes of globalization (2006) to the analysis of risk (2000), torture (1985), and war (2005b). Together, these investigations build up a significant contribution to our understanding of the imbrications of power and space. What Raffestin had in mind was a critical geographical engagement with contemporary debates, engendered by and within rigorous theoretical thinking (1997, page 92).

Pour une Géographie du Pouvoir (Raffestin, 1980) played a pivotal role in this project. Devoted to elaborating a ‘geography of power’ beyond the traditional political-geographical focus on state actors and on state territory, Raffestin here lays the conceptual foundations for his ‘thinking through territoriality’ not only as a theoretical

and epistemological project but also as a ‘political’ (*sensu lato*) programme of reflection that is aimed at challenging the role and functioning of power in its everyday expression.

“Geography must know how to be ‘immediate’, how to study ‘news in brief’ as one would say in journalist jargon. ... This type of an ‘immediate’ political geography has to follow what seems trivial in order to reveal the relationships of power which are established within our society and which are gradually changing the very society they have been produced from. It is in this sense that geographers may constitute a real authority of appeal and that the discipline itself might know—looking at its theoretical instruments of analysis—whether it produces anything else than just trivial statements” (page 245).

Raffestin’s broad concern with addressing and questioning the power geographies of the everyday resonates strongly with contemporary debates on the scope and scale of the ‘political’ in geography. Furthermore, and returning to the issue of terminology, we see again that Raffestin’s ambition goes beyond the predominant Anglophone readings of territory and territoriality. Both concepts, for Raffestin, are not merely to be understood in their relation to the state, or to the ‘political’ *strictu sensu*, but to be approached and theorized more generally from a perspective centred on everyday social life.

The proximity between Raffestin and Lefebvre has been mentioned previously with a view to the concept of ‘territory’; but Raffestin’s ‘power geography of the everyday’ also draws heavily upon Lefebvre’s (and Goffman’s) theorization of everyday life (Goffmann, 1959; Lefebvre, 1971 [1968]; 2002 [1961]). The following quote not only underscores the intrinsic relation between territoriality and ‘the everyday’ for Raffestin but also testifies to his marked structuralist stand.

“But how, in fact, how can we observe, grasp and study human territoriality? Through everyday life Everyday life, construed and lived through the mode of concatenation and repetition, is underpinned by the network of relationships that constitute human territoriality. While everyday life can be seen as the visible superstructure in which we are lost, the obvious [*ce qui va de soi*], territoriality somehow corresponds to the infrastructure which is built up through practices and knowledge [*connaissances*], both being essential to social actions, yet without ever being made explicit. We might say that territoriality consists of those invariant structures in the short and medium term, that are realised and ‘dressed’ in various forms in everyday life, but whose nucleus always remains identical” (Raffestin, 1984b, pages 439–440).

If Raffestin draws upon Lefebvre in his understanding of territory and in relating territoriality to everyday life, it is in Foucault (1998 [1976]) that he finds the conceptual equipment for developing territoriality as a geographical theory of power (Raffestin, 1980, pages 44–56).⁽⁷⁾ “Power”, for Raffestin, is a “capacity to transform the physical and social environment” (Raffestin, 1996, page 8), developing from and acting upon the relational spectrum of individuals or social groups (ie, within territoriality). With power thus conceived in a Foucauldian, relational sense, Raffestin’s understanding of territoriality, by definition, entails careful attention to the sociospatial power relations that are shaping (and shaped by) everyday life (Murphy, 2012). “Territoriality”, Raffestin writes, “is the lived side of the acting side of power” (1980, page 146).

To elaborate on this further, Raffestin distinguishes between two basic means or components of power: ‘information’ and ‘energy’. As a variable combination of energy and information, power is both genuinely related to knowledge formation (the accumulation and ordering of information) and to the accumulation and deployment

⁽⁷⁾ Raffestin’s own account of his relationship to Foucault has recently appeared in English in a collection of essays edited by Jeremy Crampton and Stuart Elden (Crampton and Elden, 2007; Raffestin, 2007).

of energy.⁽⁸⁾ Within this conceptual construct Raffestin also connects energy and information with the concepts of ‘labour’ (conceived as ‘informed energy’) and ‘mediation’ (the concrete and abstract means setting the conditions for satisfying individual or collective needs in terms of energy and information). In the next section I further elucidate the conceptual articulations in Raffestin’s thinking. This will also help to point out some possible connections with contemporary work.

Towards a geographical theory of mediation

Raffestin’s thinking through territoriality relies on two basic premises: (1) his relational understanding of human being-in-the-world, and (2) his medial understanding of sociospatial relationships. A critical assessment of Raffestin’s work must start from this double understanding of the world as relation and of the relation as mediation.

One of the analytical and empirical advantages associated with Raffestin’s focus on mediation is that it allows moving beyond the category of the ‘relational’, implying a focused and systematic attention to the Deleuzian question of “what happens ‘in between?’” (Deleuze, 1990, page 121). Raffestin asks for a type of geography focused on the instruments, codes, and ‘systems of signs’ that are mediating sociospatial relationships. This claim is led, of course, by his ambition to reorient geography from its essentialist focus on space (as predominant in the 1970s) to the study of sociospatial relations. As Raffestin (1986a) states, provocatively, for the 1980s,

“[territoriality] reverses the usual geographical approach. Its starting point lies not anymore in the analysis of space but in social actors’ instruments and codes which are leaving marks and indications in territory” (page 94).

In this focus on ‘mediators’ (abstract or concrete means) and ‘mediation’ (the process itself) Raffestin’s understanding of territoriality differs most importantly from Anglophone territoriality-as-spatial-strategy approaches. Whilst not irreconcilable in nature (Murphy, 2012), the difference lies both in ambition (as shown previously) and in perspective. Whilst Sack and Malmberg approach territoriality as an outcome of mediations (a specific behaviour or strategy of control/defence of space), Raffestin (1984c, page 141) focuses on the process of mediation itself. A theory of territoriality, for Raffestin, *is* a theory of mediation.

This focus resonates strongly with contemporary mediation-focused work, inspired, for example, by Deleuze’s (1990) writings on mediation or by actor-network theoretical approaches (Latour, 2005). Yet Raffestin’s geographical conception of mediation offers, in itself, an original contribution to these literatures, as shall be shown below.

Whilst Raffestin has never elaborated a systematic theory of mediation, the oscillations of his writings broadly outline a theoretical framework for the role of mediation in human territoriality. A reading of Raffestin’s various contributions in this regard points toward at least three centres of gravity, around which most of his contributions navigate.

A theory of limits

The first centre of gravity in Raffestin’s work on mediation arises from his various ruminations on the notion of the ‘limit’. This might be most obvious in Raffestin’s work on borders, as a specific type of geographically articulated limit (Guichonnet and Raffestin, 1974; Raffestin, 1986b), but the role of the ‘limit’ in Raffestin’s conceptions of territoriality and mediation is much more fundamental. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1961 [1922]) dictum “the limits of my world are the limits of my language”, Raffestin (1984c, page 141) claims that “the limits of my territoriality are the limits of my mediators”.

⁽⁸⁾ Following Jacques Attali (1975), Raffestin (1980) defines energy as a “potential for the displacement and/or modification of matter” (page 36). In turn, information is defined as the “form or order detectable in matter and/or energy” (page 37).

For Raffestin (1986b, page 2), territoriality always presupposes mediation, which, *eo ipso*, always entails the creation and recognition of limits.

“Mediators condition both perceptions and practices. I am saying ‘condition’ rather than ‘determine’ because mediators (as instruments, symbols, codes or techniques) have their scope and thus their limits. The concept of territoriality invites the rediscovery of the signification of limits” (Raffestin, 1984b, page 440).

Mediators also condition the autonomy (the *telos* of territoriality, for Raffestin) and the power of individuals and social groups.

“Mediators can be seen as constituting the conditions for the exercise of power and they define quite precisely the limits to liberty or autonomy of those who use them in their relationships with exteriority [and alterity]” (Raffestin, 1984c, page 141).

The notion of the limit thus acquires a very general meaning and ubiquitous status. Any culture, in sum, is a ‘machine’ for the production of limits (Raffestin, 1995, page 93). Through territoriality, Raffestin seeks to conceptualize the mediating and territorializing role of socially, culturally, politically, etc defined ‘systems of limits’ (both in the abstract and in the concrete realm). A theory of territoriality, as a theory of mediation, is also, necessarily, a theory of limits (Raffestin, 1986b).

Labour, territory, language

Second, and drawing upon the first point, Raffestin’s thinking circumnavigates three interlinked basic pillars, which are at the core of his relational and medial understanding of human territoriality: labour, territory, and language. The three ‘meta-mediators’ (Raffestin, 1995) run through many of Raffestin’s contributions, but they are brought together most systematically in his 1995 essay “Langue et territoire”.

Labour (*travail*),⁽⁹⁾ for Raffestin, is the ‘original mediator’ that allows mobilizing and ordering the ‘world of things’. Raffestin (1981, page 148) understands labour as a “natural category”, rather than as a simple economic variable. Labour (defined as ‘informed energy’) is conceived as the foundation of power, enabling and conditioning the establishment and modulation of social relationships with exteriority and alterity.

“Labour [*travail*] builds everything, but labour also changes everything. ... Labour, as informed energy, allows maintaining human relations to satisfy ones needs.

Hence emerges the relational system of territoriality” (Raffestin, 1995, pages 90–91).

In this position Raffestin is arguably at his most Marxist peak (Raffestin, 1981; Raffestin and Bresso, 1979). This assessment would, however, require further exploration of the diverse sources of Raffestin’s thinking on labour, ranging from French neurobiologist Henri Laborit (1971) to the Italian philosopher and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1985).

Territory and language, for Raffestin, are both ultimately grounded in labour. The two are conceived as universal and indispensable ‘systems of limits’, which are mediating human being-in-the-world. As such, they are both the product and the producer of human territoriality.

“Language and territory are structural invariants. ... In other words, these invariants can take multiple forms, but are always present. Language and territory are effectively at the very core of culture. No cultural geography can avoid these two essential mega-mediators” (Raffestin, 1995, page 94).

Territory mediates human relations with alterity and exteriority through its normative—regulatory weight, associated with its meanings and morphology. Thus, territory is both a stake and a tool of power. “Space is the original prison, territory is

⁽⁹⁾ The French term ‘travail’, as used by Raffestin, conveys much broader, existential meaning than the English term ‘labour’. Minca’s paper (2012), thus maintains ‘travail’ in untranslated form. Raffestin’s own contribution (2012), further elucidates his understanding of travail.

the prison created by man” (Raffestin, 1986a, page 94; 2012). Language, too, for Raffestin, is both the result of and the condition for the development and modulation of territoriality. Raffestin insists heavily on the “linguistic constitution of the world” (Gadamer, 1975 [1960]), drawing upon linguistics and semiotics, inspired, for example, by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes, and Prieto, a close friend at Geneva University.

Semiosphere

Third, Raffestin’s writings on mediation strongly revolve around the concept of the ‘semiosphere’, conceived as the semiotic space (in a broad and dynamic sense, as the ensemble of culturally ‘available’ signs, ideas, and information) in which a culture or social group is immersed (Lotman, 1990). As a precondition of thought and expression, the concept thus maps upon, and broadens, Raffestin’s aforementioned concern with language.

Drawing upon Lotman’s Tartu school of structural semiotics, Raffestin pleads for a geography centred on the codes, ideas, and semiotic systems that are mediating the structuring, destructuring, and restructuring of territory. “Geography studies the information of the world through signs”, argues Raffestin (1976, page 184).

“The deciphering key [of the structuring of territory] is not in the material reality of space but in the semiosphere, which is mobilised by human groups to transform the material reality. To act, man refers to a semiotic space, in a broad sense, delimited by boundaries whose double, abstract and concrete function determines what is retained and transformed, what is translated or not onto the level of exteriority” (Raffestin, 1986a, page 94).

This programmatic understanding of human territoriality, as a function of the socially available semiotic spaces, their limits, and internal logics, characterizes most of Raffestin’s analytical contributions. Many of these (especially in recent years) convey a deeply critical tone, which is shot through with a pessimistic assessment of the contemporary “society of signs” (Raffestin, 2006, page 251). Building on the work of Jean Baudrillard (1993 [1976]) and Heidegger (1977b [1938]), Raffestin argues that territoriality is ever more detached from its material reality, denoting a situation in which codes, models, and simulated realities are becoming the sole organizing forms, the prevailing mediating principles, of human being-in-the-world. Stripped of its geographicity, territoriality today is not about ‘dwelling’ in reality but about the (failing) attempt to ‘dwell’ in globally circulating, monetarized, and consumable signs of reality. This issue also arises powerfully in Raffestin’s (2012) own contribution to this theme issue, related, for example, to the analysis of money as the central mediator of contemporary territoriality.

Continuations

In recent years perhaps the most substantial effort to explore the differing relational compositions of human being-in-the-world, from a perspective centred on mediation, was to be found in Peter Sloterdijk’s theory of spheres (Sloterdijk, 1998; 1999; 2004). Spheres, according to Sloterdijk, are socially created, self-animated conglomerates of togetherness, in which a commonality of experiences is rendered possible and where human beings find proactive refuge from the outside world. Building on Heidegger’s “analytics of existential spatiality” (Sloterdijk, 1998, page 336), ‘being-in-the-world’, for Sloterdijk, is always ‘being-in-spheres’; ‘dwelling’ (*wohnen*) always means ‘in-dwelling’ (*einwohnen*) (page 337).

In exploring different forms and formats of social ‘being-with’ and ‘being-in’, Sloterdijk distinguishes between three main thought-figures: (1) ‘bubbles’, standing for

the ‘ensouled’ sphericity of intimate couplings; (2) ‘globes’, as a metaphor for the totalizing ideals of togetherness in religious cosmologies and political ideologies; and (3) ‘foams’, standing for the volatile polysphericalities of contemporary individualism. Yet, with the help of these thought-figures Sloterdijk is not interested in form as an immutable value, but with formation as a process (Klauser, 2010c). Sloterdijk’s (1998) concern lies with the sociocultural systems of thought, ideas, values, etc which are mediating the differing relational formations of human being-with and being-in. “A theory of spheres converges with a theory of mediation” (page 31).

“I am hence looking for a theory of existential spatiality; one could also say, a theory of inter-intelligence or of the dwelling in *‘ensouled spheres’*. Such a theory of intimate relational spaces should point out why being is always being-within-being. In-being is to be understood as being of something with something within something. Thus, I am looking for what we would call in modern terminology a theory of mediation. What else are theories of mediation than propositions to explain the ‘how’ and the ‘through what’ of the connections of different existences within a common ether” (page 552).

This quote underscores powerfully the strong connection between Raffestin’s ‘thinking through territoriality’ and Sloterdijk’s ‘thinking through spheres’. Both authors, ultimately, point to the study of the concrete and abstract means (instruments, ‘systems of thought’, and ‘systems of signs’) which are mediating the relational compositions of human being-in-the-world. What Raffestin names ‘territoriality’, for Sloterdijk becomes the “vital spherical geometries of human togetherness” (page 12).

At this point, I am not going any further in analyzing the overlaps and tensions between Sloterdijk and Raffestin; that will be the subject of a separate work. What matters here is that the example sets the tone for revisiting Raffestin today: Raffestin’s oeuvre, in its inherent theoretical consistency *and* in its pointillist composition, in its originality *and* in its terminological peculiarities, offers a series of unexpected connections with a range of contemporary theoretical debates. Other points of contact, tensions, and resonances will be revealed by Murphy, Fall, and Minca in their respective papers (this issue). Our shared aim is to act as an initial set of ‘mediators’, triggering further engagement with Raffestin’s rich and inspiring thinking through territoriality.

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