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Has Europe learned the lessons of territory? An African perspective on Oscar Mazzoleni's book

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BOOK REVIEW

Mazzoleni, Oscar (2024). *Territory and democratic politics: A critical introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan. 144 pages. ISBN: 9783031356711
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ABSTRACT

In his book, Territory and democratic politics: A critical introduction (2024), Oscar Mazzoleni reflects upon territory, and the outcome this notion creates. He pushes back against the trend of “deterritorialization” in social sciences and underlines a need for a correct understanding of territory for management of late modernity issues inclusive of citizenship, nationalism and migration. Mazzoleni further opined that ‘territory can hardly be understood as an area or a geographical space but it is an aspect of identities and politics’. Within this context, by dwelling on the territory/identity/power connection, Mazzoleni offers valuable insights into most of the problems that affect democracies today. This review contextualizes and refines Mazzoleni’s work through a lens by addressing fundamental issues related to the African context. The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the arduous nature of the land and the dynamics of democratization in Africa, which still lags in responding to the challenges of decolonization, not to mention the colonial invention of borders and nations.

In his thought-provoking book *Territory and democratic politics: A critical introduction* (2024), Oscar Mazzoleni rediscovers the notion as timeless as it is timely in engaging political thought: territory. Something as obvious as the ground we stand on is revealed to be the core of political endeavour itself. Here, for Mazzoleni, territory is not merely land or borders, but the place where people's identities, political dynamics, and the notion of the 'state' are defined.

This book is a compelling exploration of a seemingly simple yet deeply complex concept. While primarily focused on European and Western democracies, Mazzoleni's theoretical framework and insights offer valuable tools for dissecting the intricate relationship between territory and democratic politics in the African context.

Mazzoleni presents a stringent critique of the current culture of thinking in the social sciences, where territory is generally dismissed from the angle of analysis of the current almost postmodern political occurrences especially due to the globalization influence. He questions the idea of a world that has no borders resulting from the megacities and the decline of nation-states. As he points out in the very first pages (Mazzoleni, 2024, p. 1), this intentional neglect of territorial sensibility shields us from asking, and perceiving, questions and processes defining both the international and the regional. Concerns such as migration crises, the appearance of nationalist and populist politics, ethnic tensions, and the crisis of citizenship in a globalized and fragmented world cannot be adequately addressed without reflecting on the role of territory. Territory, he brings attention to the fact it is that arena where human narratives of mobility, war, and citizenship are played out. It is the premise of the human drama that plays out at all times.

This critique resonates deeply with the African context. The continent's history is intricately interwoven with the imposition of arbitrary colonial borders, the creation of artificial nation-states, and the enduring legacy of these externally imposed structures. The consequences are manifold, ranging from ongoing ethnic conflicts and resource disputes to challenges in establishing effective governance and ensuring equitable representation (Gashaw, 2017).

In the second chapter, Mazzoleni starts a quest aimed at identifying the roots of this "deterritorialized" approach. He deconstructs the main academic discourses that have led to the marginalization of territory. Each of these presents a set of captivating paradoxes to demonstrate the drawbacks of such approaches and the necessity to step further (Mazzoleni, 2024, p. 8). He, for example, denounces what he calls the "nationalist approaches"

which define “nation” as equivalent to “state” and “society”, as well as the contribution of the notion of “mass society” to build up the “individual citizen” as an entity entirely *der* territorial bond.

This deconstruction is particularly relevant for understanding the African experience. The arbitrary grouping of diverse ethnicities and communities within artificial nation-state boundaries, a hallmark of colonialism, has created enduring challenges for African societies. The struggle to build national identities that transcend ethnic divisions, the persistence of regional and local loyalties, and the ongoing negotiation of power and resource distribution across territorial lines are all deeply intertwined with the legacy of these imposed structures (Otinche, 2022).

He also looks at the nation-state and sovereignty by discussing how the nation-state has been said to subsume control over its territory due to globalization. The ‘territory’ is introduced in the third chapter as the third major axis to refer to politics (Mazzoleni, 2024, p. 23). For territory, he avers it is not fixed, but a process that occurs between and among the actors and the geographical spaces or areas. These interactions, mediated by “strategies of appropriation”, “territorialization” and “re-bordering”, redraw boundaries and reconfigure meanings of terms such as ‘location’, ‘scale’, and ‘network’. For this reason, he asserts that this “territorial approach” to understanding the dynamics of contemporary politics provides a clearer view of what is taking place.

Reconceptualizing these frameworks proves instrumental in deepening our understanding of the African environment. Territorial structures are currently undergoing conscious or involuntary reconstruction by a diverse array of agents and frameworks at every tier of regional organization—from national governments and dominant regional states to ethnic mobilizations, multinational corporations, and extensive global or transnational networks. Analyzing these processes demands a meticulous examination of historical and social factors, alongside the objectives and maneuvers of the various stakeholders involved

In the fourth chapter (*ibid*, p. 43) Mazzoleni shifts focus from Mediterranean societies to Western societies to explore the notion of territorial state from a sociological point of view. He grapples with a fundamental question: what did the state as a central institution, in its modern manifestations, evolve to? He explores the internal differentiation of the “state” and “territory” within the Westphalian system, between the “territorial state” and the “nation-state”. Sovereignty, he notes, becomes central, not only for conceptualizing and constituting the two

models but also for criminalizing them. Indeed, in engaging the conflict between territory and the state, he lays stress on ‘power’ over ‘territory’ and the ‘borders’ of the latter, and on how modernity and evolution of the state as an identifiable bureaucratic formation cemented the idea of the “territorial state”.

This exploration brings to the fore cordial issues regarding the relevance –or otherwise– of the territorial state in Africa. The European concept of the state, characterized by centralism and the monopolization of power and national culture, has always conflicted with the African social structure. The post/colonial state in Africa is intrinsically linked to the process of colonialism, which has impacted the meaning of the state and territory in Africa, the post-colonial state-building, and the decolonization of power and resources that are in constant negotiation across territories (Phiri, 2023).

The fifth chapter (Mazzoleni, 2024, p. 65) continues the discussion on “democratic citizenship” as the modern state sets up not only the parameters of being a “person” but of what constitutes an “identity” via the creation of “people”, “citizen”, and “alien”. Mazzoleni explains how the political subject called “the citizen” operates his/her rights and responsibilities in relation to territory. He does this by focusing on the correlation between what he calls “territory” and “democratic citizenship” in current nations where questions of migration and demographics are at the centre. This raises important questions: who is a part of the “people” that exist in a given geographic area? In this respect, how does the growing interdependence of societies affect the notion of “people”? But how does this dynamic of nationality and citizenship function in this respect?

These tensions are more conspicuous in the African region. Due to historical migration within and across borders on the continent, coupled with the legacy of colonialism, the unequal distribution of the continent, and the emergence of other economic forces in the world, it has become difficult to define democracy and citizenship. Therefore, in contemporary citizenship debates, national citizenship and territorial belonging present a fluid status where questions of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, as well as the rights of minorities, hold paramount importance.

In the sixth chapter, we have Mazzoleni’s paper on territorial voting or “the geography of voting”, identifying how the notion of “place” or “geographical belonging” condition people’s political preference and behaviour. More importantly, he stresses the need to examine multiple

scales of territory to understand the logic of voting (ibid, p. 81). He elucidates how this dynamic influences the extent to which political parties and key political performers successfully retain or lose their electorate, especially in a globalized world where the envisaged economic and social divide is unbearably wide. He claims that globalization and capitalist crises that reallocate resources and constantly change the borders between 'core' and 'peripheral' regions link such areas increasingly essential for explaining electoral votes, both in European and US contexts.

This analysis provides a framework for understanding the complex geography of voting in Africa. The continent's diverse social, economic, and political landscapes create a mosaic of territorial divides that shape electoral behaviour. Ethnic and regional identities, access to resources and opportunities, and the perceived responsiveness of political institutions to local concerns all play a role in shaping voting patterns.

Chapter seven examines the phenomenon of "territorial populism" and looks into the ways this political force employs the idea of "territory" to stage collective subjectivity and chart political programs. As Mazzoleni rightly notes, territorial populism should be regarded as one of the key theoretical perspectives with which to study the issues facing both territory and the state in the present day. He underpins a deep correlation between populism and "borders of territory," which forms the basis for the formation of the nation's identity (ibid, p. 102). According to him, this notion represents one of the four fundamental ideological supports for populist parties, especially those of the nationalist and sovereignist right wing, for which "territory" is a fundamental value.

This exploration sheds light on the rise of populist movements and leaders in various parts of Africa. These actors often appeal to a sense of belonging and shared identity rooted in specific territories, claiming to represent the "real" people against a corrupt and out-of-touch elite. They often mobilize support by exploiting anxieties about migration, economic insecurity, and the perceived erosion of cultural values.

Cutting across the book is the Covid-19 crisis which is illustrated in the eighth chapter as a crisis with deep territorial resonance (p. 113). Mazzoleni also calls for reconsidering the function of the territorial state in this regard, how states and international institutions have reshuffled their place in the Covid-19 planetary response, such as the implementation of lockdowns, closure of borders, or decrees restricting freedom of movement. He also looks into the nature of populism and far-right politics, and the escalation of ideological and political struggles over pandemic measures.

The present analysis is useful for elucidating the epidemiological experience of the pandemic in Africa. This, coupled with weak state capacity, poverty, and preexisting poor healthcare systems, has made the continent's response to the virus inadequate and its social and economic impact worse. It also underlines the concept of globalization and the necessity for concern regarding equalization and the availability of vaccines and resources.

In his last chapter (*ibid.*, p. 127), Mazzoleni supports the call for a less rigid analysis of the link between territory and the modern state. He proposes three "ideal types" of territory: They are as follows: (1) territory, or territory as a stable space; (2) territory in transformation, or territory as a space in transformation; and (3) politicized territory, or territory as a politicized space. As in his previous articles, he underlines the necessity of matching each specific topic with the most suitable 'ideal type' and appeals to attend to certain actual political changes and contexts of the analyzed studies.

This framework is particularly valuable for analyzing the African context. The continent's dynamic territorial spaces, shaped by historical legacies, ongoing transformations, and a constant negotiation of power and belonging, require a nuanced and context-specific approach. Understanding the interplay of stability, contingency, and politicization within different territorial contexts is crucial for grasping the complexities of democratic politics in Africa.

Thus, this book is not simply a political science account or a theoretical discourse. It is an invitation to explore how "territory" gets at the heart of democratic politics in fundamental manners. Mazzoleni takes us back to the basics of territory and shows us that it is not simply the representation of land or nation; much less is territory merely a mere representation of the territory. This is an application of politics in as much as it defines our stand with who we are, and where we relate; our histories and forms of identity. Therefore, this book provides "territory" as an important concept for comprehending the state and modern democracy in the context of global politics, and therefore is a worthwhile addition to contemporary academic scholarship. He shows that the territorial approach is not just an approach to the geography of geopolitics but an outlook by which the various interlocking factors involved in constructing the democracies of the world can be understood.

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