

Exercises in the  
history of ideas:  
an interview with  
Stuart Elden

— Dale Leorke &  
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## Exercises in the history of ideas



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Introduction, by Dale Leorke

In a section of his most recent book *The Birth of Territory* (2013), Stuart Elden discusses a work by the sixteenth-century French political philosopher Jean Bodin, entitled *Six Livres de la République*. Elden begins by outlining the ‘enormous textual problems to grapple with’ when discussing the text (2013a, p. 262). *Six Livres* was originally written in French in 1576, going through multiple editions throughout the author’s life. Bodin also wrote a Latin version in 1586. But rather than simply translating the first text, the Latin edition also expanded on and refined his original analysis. In the early seventeenth century, an English translation was produced, but it was not a literal translation of either the French or Latin version. Instead, it drew on both, amalgamating them into a single text in which it is difficult to distinguish the original source. Citing another scholar’s dismissal of any discussion which doesn’t engage with Bodin’s work in both languages as ‘flawed’, Elden proceeds to analyse the text drawing on the various editions published throughout the centuries. He quotes specific passages from numerous books in the text, distinguishing which terms and phrases appear only in the French or Latin.

This section in *The Birth of Territory* neatly exemplifies Elden’s work as a whole. It is not an exception, but the norm, in Elden’s books to analyse texts in multiple languages, frequently returning to the original to clarify key terms. His books often deal with a large range of texts from scholars in various countries and periods, stretching across hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of years. In his book on Henri Lefebvre, Elden (2004, p. 5) observes that the French theorist is ‘erratic in his use of references, eclectic in his examples,

and almost wilful in his disregard for scholarly convention.’ The same cannot be said of Elden: his books are meticulously researched and referenced. They dissect and synthesise large volumes of works by single authors — as in his books on Lefebvre and Heidegger — or a range of thinkers on a specific concept, as evidenced by *The Birth of Territory*. At the same time, they make reference to precise, sometimes minute, details that are often overlooked by other scholars.

This ability to provide wide-ranging analyses of complex historical developments and turning points in intellectual thought while narrowing in on the minute details of his subject makes Elden’s work an embodiment of rigorous scholarship. It has earned him a number of accolades: his two most recent books, *The Birth of Territory* and *Terror and Territory* (2009), both won an award from the Association of American Geographers.<sup>1</sup> But it also makes his books highly intellectual, sometimes dense (albeit always readable) contributions to the various fields across which he works and therefore potentially less accessible to a more general readership. An unflattering review of *The Birth of Territory* describes it as ‘painstaking’ and ‘a wholly unsexy book’, observing that the ‘text to endnotes ratio is an overbearing 2:1’. This, the reviewer insists, is not a criticism of the book but a ‘natural outcome’ of Elden’s method (Campanile 2014, p. 5). In contrast, though, a review of *Terror and Territory* contends that ‘Elden’s book deserves wide and careful reading’ and ‘will appeal to geographers, historians and political theorists’ alike (Massoumi 2011, p. 78).

These issues aside, Elden’s work can perhaps best be described as close textual analyses of key thinkers and concepts; or, as he puts it himself in this interview, ‘exercises in the history of ideas’. In a Q & A with the blog ‘Exploring Geopolitics’, Elden cites a range of influences that informed his approach to *The Birth of Territory*. These include the German intellectual tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history or the history of concepts); Foucauldian genealogy; and ‘the

Cambridge school of political thought influenced by Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock'.<sup>2</sup> Traces of these theoretical approaches can be found in most of Elden's work: they are deeply informed by past events, concepts and shifting ideas, while always linking these to the present. The title of Elden's first book, *Mapping the Present* (2001), provides an apt descriptor of his work as a whole. That book traces the emergence of a spatial history by reading Foucault's work alongside that of his predecessor Heidegger, arguing that many of Foucault's ideas cannot be understood without reference to Heidegger's influence.

His next single-authored book is the aforementioned study of Lefebvre's work, which similarly blends details of the philosopher's life with informed, incisive interpretations of his thought. Its introduction ends with a quote from Lefebvre on Marx: 'We interrogate these texts in the name of the present and the possible; and this is very precisely the method of Marx, which he prescribes so that the past (events and documents) lives again and serves the future' (Lefebvre, quoted in Elden 2004, p. 10). His third book, *Speaking Against Number* (2006), is perhaps his most specifically focused work. It examines Heidegger's political thought to analyse the interrelation between language, mathematical calculation and politics. Focusing more on Heidegger's writings on politics than his own political views and affiliation with the Nazi Party, Elden argues that 'there is a way of using Heidegger's thought for political purposes that is not blind to the way it was employed by him' (Elden 2006, p. 11).

Elden's most recent book projects focus on the concept of territory. *Terror and Territory* seeks to counter the largely neglected analysis of those two terms in present debates around the 'war on terror'. A review describes it as 'an important and timely book, making a strong case for the presence of territory as a continuing theme in global politics' (Massoumi 2011, p. 78). His most recent book, *The Birth of Territory*, builds on the work of that book (and, as Elden

notes in the Q & A quoted above, in some ways precedes it). It examines the emergence of the concept of territory. It does so through close textual analysis of ancient Greek and Roman scholarship through to early modern thought, ostensibly tracing the shifting origins of the term from Plato to Leibniz. Elden's work on territory is set to continue in a project he is currently undertaking on the use of territory in a number of Shakespeare's plays. It will be published as a book which argues that although the word 'territory' rarely appears in Shakespeare's manuscripts, it is 'not marginal to his work' and 'exemplif[ies] different aspects of the question of territory' — especially how we understand territorial disputes today.<sup>3</sup> Elden is also currently writing a book entitled *Foucault's Last Decade*, scheduled for publication in 2016. That book draws on both published and unpublished work by Foucault and aims to 'situate his key works in relation to each other, and to outline an intellectual history of his final project on the history of sexuality.'<sup>4</sup> Other projects he is presently working on include a rethinking of the concept of the 'geo' in geopolitics and an examination of the intersection between territory and urbanism.

Elden was born in 1971 in Ipswich, located in the East Anglican county of Suffolk, England, to parents who were both teachers. His family moved southwest to nearby Colchester when he was around three years old, where he spent his childhood.<sup>5</sup> At eighteen years of age he attended Brunel University on the outskirts of London, completing a four-year undergraduate degree in Politics and Modern History (awarded in 1994). As part of his degree, Elden spent eighteen months doing work experience. He conducted this at a county court, a local economy research unit at South Bank University, and in a policy research unit at the social services division at Kensington Town Hall. He stayed on at the latter workplace after finishing his degree and beginning his PhD, also at Brunel. In another recent interview, Elden states that his experience working in local government dur-

ing this time was important in ‘shaping how I thought about politics generally’. It also helped him to decide that ‘I wanted to be an academic — to write, to teach, to speak and, most importantly, to do these on questions I thought were important rather than being told what to research.’<sup>6</sup>

Elden completed his PhD in 1999, after earning a graduate teaching assistantship at the end of his first year and a part-time teaching position at Royal Holloway College at the University of London in the final year. He was supervised first by David Wootton and Barbara Goodwin, then Mark Neocleous as his focus changed from a history of the concept of freedom to a discussion of spatial history in the works of Heidegger, Foucault and Nietzsche. His thesis was revised and published as *Mapping the Present* a little over a year later. After earning his doctorate, Elden took a teaching position in the Politics and International Studies department at The University of Warwick for a temporary post that lasted three years. After that he got a lecturer post at Durham University in North East England in 2002, which he held for eleven years. He was promoted to Reader after three years and then to Professor two years later at the age of thirty-five, only eight years after completing his PhD.

In September 2013 he rejoined the Politics and International Studies department at Warwick as Professor of Political Theory and Geography where he currently resides, completing a cross-disciplinary round-trip from political science to geography and back again. As well as his five single-authored books, Elden has also edited or co-edited several collections on a range of thinkers, including Lefebvre (2003, 2009), Foucault (Crampton & Elden 2007), Kant (Elden & Mendieta 2011) and Sloterdijk (Elden 2012). He has also been the editor of the journal *Society and Space (Environment and Planning D)* since 2006. In addition to his many journal articles, book chapters and translations, any summary of Elden’s professional career would be remiss without mentioning his extraordinarily prolific blog ‘Progressive Geographies’.<sup>7</sup> As

well as frequently linking to articles of interest — it is not uncommon for Elden to make upwards of five or even ten posts a day — the blog also serves as a public notebook. It often provides updates on his current projects, annotated bibliographies on specific writers and topical events/organisations (such as the terrorist organisation Boko Haram) and details and recordings of public lectures.

The following interview with Elden was conducted by myself and Suneel Jethani on 4 March, 2014. It was recorded in Melbourne while Elden was visiting Monash University as part of the Monash–Warwick alliance, on the same day he gave a lecture on Foucault's *La Société punitive* at Melbourne University.<sup>8</sup> The interview recording was transcribed and Elden was given the opportunity to revise the text and was also asked several follow-up questions. But we have sought to keep the original discussion as conversational and as close to the original transcript as possible, and Elden has very kindly complied with this request. Most texts mentioned throughout the interview are listed in the bibliography at the end of this paper. As the beginning of this introduction points out, Elden is a highly rigorous scholar, so, fittingly, the interview begins with a discussion of his approach to researching, reading and writing. It also focuses on his relationship with Lefebvre, particularly his thoughts on Lefebvre's ongoing contemporary relevance in light of the publication of his previously unpublished manuscript *Towards an Architecture of Enjoyment* (2014) and the widespread interest in his concept of rhythmanalysis. The interview then focuses largely on Elden's current projects, particularly his work on Foucault, geopolitics, the relationship between territory and urbanism and Shakespeare's plays. It provides a snapshot of Elden's present thinking on his works in their various stages as they continue to evolve and develop. As might be expected, like Elden's work itself the interview is also replete with references to works from a vast terrain of disciplines, thinkers, and perspectives, both past and present.

### Interview

DALE LEORKE: If I had to describe a common thread between all your books, I'd say it's an ability to unpack specific writers — whether it's Heidegger, Lefebvre, Foucault — or concepts in immense detail, while relating their work back to its broader historical period and context. Can you talk a bit about your approach to research, reading and writing? What techniques and processes do you use to keep a handle on the vast volumes of material you discuss — which sometimes span across multiple millennia, as in *The Birth of Territory*?

STUART ELDEN: I think that's a nice way to put what I try to do. It is very much a close reading set of techniques. It is about reading texts in contexts and I put quite a lot of importance on engaging with the text itself and tracking back to the original language as much as I possibly can. This is why my work has tended to restrict itself to Western Europe and Western European thought. With French, I'm able to read texts without translation. German and Latin are harder. And then with other texts, I'm usually reliant on translations to give me the way into working with those texts, even if I do go back and look at them in terms of specific details. And that obviously takes a lot of time, because it multiplies how many texts you're reading because you're trying to read them in both languages.

In terms of techniques, you mean things like how I take notes, how I write, how I build things up? Okay, I take notes almost exclusively on a computer now. And if I do take notes on paper, then I type them up fairly soon afterwards. So I build up quite big files of material, of quotations, of references, that then I can use as the material to turn into writing. And quite often those note files get re-saved as first drafts and I write around the quotes, I put them together, I add things. So texts sort of build up or accumulate through commentary around quotations. That's quite often how I work. Occasionally I will sit down with a completely blank screen

and just free write, possibly with a book next to me for references and so on. That's how I write book reviews — I don't tend to take all the notes then try to write the piece, I have a sort of sketch of where I might go with it and then just start writing. But most of the time I work in a different way, I begin with note files and then build up texts. So it's very much the text emerging from sets of notes and so on.

I keep a lot of working files. So for the Foucault work I'm doing at the moment I've got quite a few sort of 'tools' or 'reference' files that I have. So one of the first things I did was to build a chronology, a sort of a timeline, which used Daniel Defert's chronology from *Dits et écrits* as a beginning. But it also filled in all the details I could find of when he'd given specific interviews, lectures and when other key events had happened. Then I've been adding to that as I've been going. It's been very useful in terms of what I've been trying to do chronologically with Foucault. That's to think, 'Okay, I've been working here on this text, but there was this interview that he gave at the same time and that's a useful perspective on that'. I've seen some discrepancies in existing accounts as a result, or noticed other things.

So this has been quite useful for me, to build up references and bibliographies and other things like that as tools to use as I'm working. So that's something else that helps me to keep a handle on things. But the advantage of having everything on computer is that you can search, you can find everything that way. Whereas the way I used to work in the PhD, say, was paper notes: much harder to locate things after the event, something you wrote from six months before or something. So does that help in terms of the sorts of things I'm using?

DL: Yep, definitely. You started out by talking about the challenge of reading texts in both their original language and English translations. How important is this for you?

SE: I think it's essential. I think one of the problems that I've criticised other people for is this claim that they're do-

ing a close reading. But if they're not reading things in the original, I find that difficult to understand. Having done some translation myself, particularly with Lefebvre, translation is always a compromise between possible translations. Some translations you find have got straightforward errors, but more often translations are focusing on specific things. So, for instance, there's a term that comes up, they're trying to work out a way to translate this. It's probably consistent throughout the work as a whole because they don't want to keep translating key terms with different words because that gets confusing. So they have to come up with some kind of compromise. A lot of translations are very good for the general purpose of being used for a class text if you're teaching something, or you're someone who's just interested in the thinker in terms of the key ideas. But tracking specific concepts or specific claims you might want to make about why did this thinker choose this particular word to signify this particular concept? I think that becomes harder when you're trying to do that work on them if you can't go back and find out what the particular word that they're using is.

So another example from the Foucault work recently is *History of Sexuality Volume 1*. One of the key terms that Foucault uses in that is the notion of the *dispositif* and it's a term that's been picked up by a lot of thinkers. So Giorgio Agamben wrote the essay 'What is an apparatus?', '*Che cos'è un dispositivo?*', Deleuze did similar in a slightly earlier period. The choice that was made for the term in English I think was problematic. The main way it's translated by Robert Hurley is 'deployment', which is a strange translation. But if it was consistently translated as deployment you could simply read the text in English and know that every time the word deployment comes up that the concept is *dispositif*, except that's not what he does. He translates it as 'deployment' most of the time, but also as 'apparatus', 'mechanism', 'layout', 'organisation', these very different terms. Now those are used also to translate other French words. So it's impossible to

understand what Foucault is doing with that key concept if you're simply reading it in English without the ability to go back to the French.

With *The Birth of Territory*, almost always I found something in going back to the original that made it worthwhile to put that effort into it. So, for example, if you read Plato, say *The Laws*, or Aristotle's *Politics*, or Caesar, if you read them in English the word 'territory' appears all over the place. If you go back to the Greek or Latin you realise that the words being used are not straightforwardly what we understand by the modern concept of territory. So what words did they use? And what might they be implying with those words — concepts and practices? So that's something I spent a lot of time working on and I think it was nearly always worthwhile. Occasionally you find something and you think, 'yeah, that's what I expected it to be'. And I think often with a good translation if you know something about the thinker you should be able to read the translation and work out roughly what the key concepts in that sentence or passage would be in the original language. But often I was surprised: 'oh, that's the word they used', they didn't use this one you might have expected, and so on.

DL: In researching these scholars, to what extent do the details of their personal lives and relationships factor into your analysis, as well as your general sense of them as individuals? For instance, the title of the book you're currently writing, *Foucault's Last Decade*, implies that it will provide a certain insight into his personal circumstances during that time in his life, even if your focus is on his writing and lectures. How much of Foucault's personal life beyond academia figure into your discussion in that book?

SE: It depends. I'm not writing biographies in a standard sense. They are more exercises in the history of ideas, or perhaps intellectual biographies. With Foucault I'm very interested in his political activism outside the academy, and I think closely situating that within the chronology of his teaching and

writing can be very revealing. So, the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons*, for example, began its campaign at the time Foucault was delivering the *Lectures on the Will to Know* course in early 1971. There are some similarities in the language and motivation between the course and the *Groupe's* statements that I think are revealing. His later engagement with events in Poland and Iran has recently been discussed in relation to the work in Marcelo Hoffman's *Foucault and Power*, and I'll try to make related points in my study. So, the public life outside of lectures and books, definitely, but I'm not so interested in the personal life beyond that.

With Heidegger, this is of course a key question given his membership of the Nazi party, his holding of political office at the University of Freiburg, the speeches that have been available for some time and now the posthumously published writings. Here the personal life and the academic work blur, and this raises a host of important questions. These have become starker recently with the 'Black Notebooks' and their anti-Semitic comments. I'm interested in the interrelation of the work with the politics, and don't think you can make sense of one without the other. That was what I tried to explore in *Speaking Against Number*. But I'm not so interested in his affairs or those of his wife. With Lefebvre, I was grateful to get some insight into his life through his correspondence with Norbert Guterman, which is archived at Columbia University Library. But while he had an interesting life, it's only interesting because of the work, and that for me remains the key focus.

DL: Before we discuss some of your current research, we were wondering if we could ask a few questions about your relationship with Lefebvre. Have you had an opportunity to read his book that is being published this year in English as *Towards an Architecture of Enjoyment*? How relevant do you see his work to current issues in urban studies and architecture, and how much more do you think there is left to be uncovered of his ideas and writing?

SE: The first publication in any language is going to be this one — there's not an existing French version published, although there's obviously a French manuscript. The editor of the English translation, Łukasz Stanek, sent me a copy of the proofs and I've recently interviewed him for *Society and Space's* open site, the journal I edit.<sup>9</sup> We discuss the book and the editing of that work, as well as how it fits in Lefebvre's work as a whole. Unlike most people who've worked on Lefebvre, Łukasz has actually gone back to what is available in archives and spoke to people who worked with Lefebvre and this is how he discovered this manuscript. The book is interesting because Lefebvre is obviously important in urban studies and in spatial studies, and some architects have picked up on some of his work. There are a few pieces that were published in his lifetime on architecture. For example he contributed a piece to a collection studying a kind of house called a 'pavillon' (a suburban house), and this piece is in *Key Writings*, but much of Lefebvre's work has not talked about architecture explicitly. The best place to look is Łukasz's own book *Henri Lefebvre on Space*. So I think this new book will be important in another discipline that uses spatial work and has engaged with Lefebvre a little.

In terms of Lefebvre generally and how much more is there to be discovered? There's a huge amount, and only a fraction of it is in English. Even though over the last twenty years or so quite a lot more has been translated, there are still probably about two thirds of his books that are not translated. There's an element of sort of diminishing returns, so, you know, there're a lot of books on Marx and Marxism and we've probably got most of the key important messages from Lefebvre there already. But his work on philosophy, for example, is almost completely untranslated. So I think there's quite a lot of work there. I've been talking to some publishers about books, if we were to do the first book of Lefebvre on philosophy, which should be the first and which should be the next couple and then maybe there's potential for more after that.

Some of his works on philosophy are of historical interest, to be honest. So he wrote a kind of hatchet job on existentialism in 1946 which was on behalf of the Communist Party. This was when lots of people on the left seemed to be gravitating towards existentialism at the time of Sartre particularly. So Lefebvre was sent out to do a critique of the problems with it. He wrote a more interesting book on structuralism as a critique of Lévi-Straus and Althusser in the 1960s. But in his own philosophical work, there's a book called *Métaphilosophie* which is the book I've suggested be the first to translate, because it's behind a lot of the other things he's doing. It's a sort of a theoretical framework that helps make possible *The Production of Space* and the *Critique of Everyday Life*— the subtitle of the third volume of this is called *Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life*. It was an important conceptual frame within his more slightly applied work on space and everyday life, for example.

The other work I still think has been under-exploited is his very political writings. So Neil Brenner and I did the collection *State, Space, World* which was to try to show how Lefebvre was an important Marxist state theorist. There's a spatial element within that work but this state work is important around these kinds of questions. Then there's the work on 'the world' which we tried to link in there. But if I ever get the time to do another collection of Lefebvre's writings ... there's the editing work and possibly translation, but also the single biggest work is doing the notes, the footnotes. Because Lefebvre almost never referenced things properly and a lot of the references are obscure and so need to be corrected or clarified. So if I ever get the time to do another one I'd like to do a kind of 'writings on politics', or writings on politics and the urban. So this would collect all of the other urban writings of Lefebvre that haven't been translated — there's still some very interesting ones, some of them are political, some about social classes and the city for example — and do some of the more explicitly political writings alongside that.

But after that *State, Space, World* book Neil and I said we probably could have written a book together in the time it took us to do that. So there's the issue of what do you do with your time.

SUNEEL JETHANI: You've written extensively on Lefebvre's affinity not only with Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche but also with Heidegger and Foucault. Given the centrality of the body that runs through much of Lefebvre's work, how does Lefebvre's conception of the body go beyond these thinkers, for instance through his engagement with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre?

SE: It's a good question and I'm not sure I've got a very good answer to it. Merleau-Ponty is probably more important than Sartre. Lefebvre and Sartre had a difficult relationship and that existentialism book I just mentioned is an obvious example of why they didn't get on terribly well. Sartre was a few years younger than Lefebvre but they are the same kind of generation and so there was some rivalry there. They had some kind of reconciliation later on in life. So, in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre says the key person to read on dialectics is Lefebvre and his approach to dialectics is 'beyond reproach'. And Sartre picks up what Lefebvre calls the regressive-progressive mode of analysis and Sartre uses that in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But Lefebvre never, as far as I know, returned the favour in the sense of more careful engagement with Sartre's work. I can't remember any references where he goes into the *Critique*, for example, in detail and he was very sceptical about the early Sartre.

Merleau-Ponty I think is a more interesting example, but again it would be tangled up in the politics of how did they relate to the French Communist Party and particularly *Les temps modernes*, the journal, and the slightly prickly relation Lefebvre would have had with that journal. So, yes, where does he get the work on the body? It's not through Heidegger, whose neglect of the body is well-known. I sus-

pect it's probably through Nietzsche: that would be the most obvious place for him to have found those kind of things and there are some references. There's another book of his on philosophy that I think should be translated, it's a book called *Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche*, where he talks through how those three thinkers are very important to him and what he takes from each of them. With Lefebvre's reading of Nietzsche it's around kind of ideas of creating, creation, rather than just production. But also the body and interesting questions of works of art and so on. So I'd suspect it's Nietzsche rather than those other writers that he'd be taking and developing some of those themes from.

His relation to Foucault, just to clarify: Lefebvre couldn't stand Foucault, he found Foucault problematic in all sorts of ways. Foucault, as far as I know, only mentions Lefebvre once in a recently published interview, and it's a throwaway, dismissive comment. It's interesting that you sometimes have these people that ... now, reading Foucault and Lefebvre together has become quite common. These people can reinforce each other and this has been done in some creative ways. You can date it back to Edward Soja's work, for example, in the 1980s, or in French a Swiss geographer called Claude Raffestin who writes a book in 1980, *Pour une géographie du pouvoir*, 'For a Geography of Power', and he's reading Lefebvre and Foucault together and now that's quite common. But in 1980 that was highly unusual. So you do get people trying to put them together today, but almost everything Lefebvre says about Foucault is critical, there are references in various places. It's strange how some of those French thinkers are very close and always engaging with each other, and other times people are working almost entirely apart from each other. So Derrida, for example, never mentions Lefebvre; it's kind of strange, isn't it?

SJ: I wanted to talk a bit about rhythmanalysis and particularly its relation to Lefebvre's conception of the body. Much of the analytic potential of rhythmanalysis stems from

its unfinished nature. What directions do you see rhythmanalysis being taken in? Are there particular contemporary social practices where you see rhythmanalysis being particularly valuable in understanding hidden mechanisms of power or poorly understood political nuances of the body and of space?

SE: It's interesting to me that *Rhythmanalysis* has been picked up more than any other book of Lefebvre's that I've been involved in. It's sold the most copies and it's certainly had the most references compared to *Key Writings* or *State, Space, World*. I thought this was a little bit unusual because it's an interesting book but it is unfinished, it is a little bit clumsy in places and it's not really fully worked through. You know, we don't know quite how much Lefebvre felt he needed to do on the manuscript when he died and it was published after his death. And it's a complicated thing because he co-wrote a couple of pieces leading up to it with his wife, Catherine Régulier. The book, though, comes out only under his name so it's not entirely clear how much he wrote, how much she wrote and is unacknowledged, how much was done by René Lourau who did the editorial work after Lefebvre's death. So it's a kind of ambiguous text compared to ones Lefebvre finished. Also, he was writing this in his late 1980s and early '90s. So it's a slightly ambiguous text in a whole range of ways and that's possibly why there's a lot of potential to open it up and exploit it. Though people have certainly found his everyday life work and *The Production of Space* productive too, even though those were works that he published earlier in his career. Although we tend to forget he was seventy-three when *The Production of Space* came out and we tend to think of that as an earlier writing, but it's actually quite late writing by most people's standards.

Where is it going? What I think is interesting is that there's not been an enormous amount of work that's picked up and used it. It quite often gets referenced, but I've not seen huge numbers of appropriations of it. There are a few places: there's a book called *Geographies of Rhythm* that Tim

Edensor edited a couple of years ago, it had a couple of essays that were trying to sort of pick up and develop it. Some other geographers have written about the question of rhythm and Lefebvre is one of the people that they've discussed, although others like Deleuze and Guattari also come in for thinking about these questions. As for how useful it is... well, for me, what I thought was good about it was that it was a book that would open up the fact that Lefebvre wasn't just interested in space and challenging the ways we thought about space. He was also interested in thinking about time differently and you can find that in a number of places in Lefebvre's work. So he does work on the question of 'the moment' and how we think about these kind of moments of change. He does that particularly in a book called *La Somme et la Reste*, 'The Sum and the Remainder', which is a kind of intellectual autobiography of the first fifty-five years or so of his life and career that he writes at the moment he's leaving the French Communist Party. So it's a sort of summation of where he is and an opening to the new direction, 'freed from the party shackles' kind of thing. He writes an interesting book about history in 1970 called *La fin de l'histoire* which talks about history and historical temporality and so on. And then *Rhythmanalysis* with the idea of rhythms and challenging linear notions of time and the cyclical.

So there's quite a lot in Lefebvre where he does work on time and rethinking and challenging calendar time, clock time. And some of that ties to Marx, the working day, the rhythms of the working day and so on, that goes to what we now call cultural studies-type work. So I hope there is quite a lot of potential, but it's for others to do. Lefebvre didn't give us more than is included in that book, which included two related essays, though there's one piece on music 'Musique et sémiologie' that I wanted to include in *Rhythmanalysis* but it was not possible in terms of what the contract allowed. But apart from that I can't really think of any other places where Lefebvre does this, so it's almost for his readers and a

new generation of people to pick up. You know, is this useful, can we do things with it? And I think people are starting to do that, but it's not something I can imagine I'm going to do much with. This is one of the things about translation — this is why I don't want to be seen to be knocking translators, or the great need for translations — because translation makes possible appropriations. And you'll find this with any number of translations, what's interesting there is what people can then go and do with it. So I'm interested to see what people can do with rhythmanalysis even though that's not where my work is going to go.

SJ: What contribution do you think a re-reading of rhythmanalysis might make to the critical study of contemporary neoliberally-oriented and goal-directed projects of self-knowledge, such as self-tracking, the quantified self or biohacking, all of which aim to produce knowledge of social and biological rhythms and routines?

SE: That's a very interesting question, and I don't know nearly enough about that to be able to give a good answer. There are some very good studies that examine some of these kinds of issues — Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge's *Code/Space*, or Louise Amoore's *The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability* come to mind. Some of the work of the Center for Urban Science and Progress (CUSP) at New York University is thinking about these kinds of questions, especially in relation to the Hudson Yards development in Manhattan.<sup>10</sup> I'm going to be working with CUSP as part of my job, because University of Warwick is a partner institution, so it may be that I have a better answer to this in a couple of years' time. I'm certainly thinking about Lefebvrian themes in relation to the work I'm planning to do there — the first likely work is thinking through the relation between the urban and territory. Lefebvre was certainly interested in the contrast between biological and social rhythms, especially as the latter were transformed through capitalism — from the rhythm of the working day to

the rhythms of the city. The data that is being produced today, and that CUSP is set up to analyse, will give a new set of perspectives on these questions. Part of my role there will be to introduce a social science, and, I hope, critical perspective into the work.

DL: You've talked about a recent project which aims to take the idea of geopolitics seriously by extrapolating the concept of territory not just to countries and regions, but also to the level of the Earth and the processes of the land and global politics. Although this project is in the early stages, can you talk about how this will work? The field of international relations has long been concerned with questions of post-nationalism and global governance, but it seems like you're reaching towards something more in the realm of materialism and 'deep time' geology than this?

SE: I had the thought for a number of years of doing something on ... it was originally the concept of world. So 'world' as it appears in a number of thinkers working after Heidegger. So Eugen Fink was one of the thinkers that I did some work on; Kostas Axelos was another. The world is important in terms of what I've done around Lefebvre. So I had this idea at one point of bringing these interests together and if I could develop something around the way that the concept of world is being thought and if I could extend it to more contemporary thinkers: Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, Peter Sloterdijk. So, people that are thinking about the world or the global as a concept and then how I could put that work into dialogue with all this work on globalisation and global studies more generally. I thought for a while about how I could do this. I thought one of the problems with all that global literature was that it wasn't very good on concepts. And yet, you've got all this philosophical work that isn't very good on anything to do with the world: it's good on the concept of the world but it's not very good on global politics or the world today as we imagine it.

So I had one version of this as a project that I tried to

get funding for to allow me to do this. I didn't end up getting funding, so I put the project to one side. But the idea with that was to take specific concepts or specific practices and try and stage a dialogue between some of the philosophical work and some of the more contemporary kind of 'political detail' work. And so I had various bits around this. I had a paper on the concept of the fossil which Quentin Meillassoux picks up in his work and says this is one of the reasons why a lot of philosophical work falls down: because it can't deal with something that precedes human existence, precedes human cognition. So this is the critique of what he calls 'correlationism'. So in this paper what I tried to do is to say that actually there is a significant amount of philosophical work around the question of fossils. The three people that I picked were Leibniz, Kant and Foucault, all of whom discuss fossils in different places. So it was an attempt to say that Leibniz was pre-Kantian, a kind of pre-correlationist. Kant is the first person who puts it in the frame that Meillassoux does. Then Foucault is one of the people who seems to be, on that reading, problematic for those kind of readings. The idea was to say that they all talk about fossils and if you recognised this, could you then have a different dialogue between these contemporary thinkers and some of the historical ones? I haven't submitted this paper anywhere but have given it as a talk a couple of times.

Then I had ideas of doing things on the notion of volume, of space in three dimensions not two, which I did publish as a paper; on the notion of violence, on the notion of play, and so on. So the idea was picking these concepts and practices and studying this relation between contemporary debates and historical conceptual debates. But I didn't end up delivering on that project, partly because I didn't have the funding and partly because it started to mutate into something different which is where I'm thinking at the moment. This is that there are a lot of interesting debates about the notion of the 'geo', as in the earth or the world. So people like Elizabeth Grosz within philosophy. Some geographers have also started to en-

gage with her work. People like Nigel Clark, Arun Saldanha, Kathryn Yusoff have all picked up on what Grosz is particularly doing with this and asking 'could we call this political geology' or something along those lines? In a way, the notion of geo-politics ought to be able to speak to a kind of politics of the earth and yet geopolitics today has often been effectively turned into big international politics. It's evident in some of the things that you just mentioned in terms of global governance, post-nationalism and so on. It's not that that work isn't valuable, it's just not particularly where I'm interested in thinking about this. But coming from having eleven years in a Geography department and now being back in a Politics and International Studies department, I'm thinking what would happen if we took the 'geo' in geopolitics seriously? How could we think about some of these questions?

People like Simon Dalby are doing work on this on geopolitics of climate change. The geopolitics of climate change has to be something that takes earth-processes seriously. But could we think also about this kind of geopolitics in terms of states and their boundaries? So rivers are often used as boundaries between states, but rivers are a dynamic feature of the landscape rather than a static one. Or could you think of something like what Phil Steinberg at Durham is doing around the idea of ice as a material element on which people live, on which property over land is asserted, particularly, say, in frozen parts of Canada. But with global climate change ice is becoming a much more dynamic feature of the landscape. So if you're going to take ice as something, rather than solid land or water, but as something that moves between them at different times of the year and has different temporalities and materialities and so on: how do you then think about the geopolitics of ice in particular? So I think there's something to be done around those kinds of questions and some of my work is starting to point in the direction of those ideas. But I've got so many other projects on the go at the moment and I'm prioritising certain ones.

DL: So do you imagine this might be a book project or something more research-based? Can you envision yourself doing any empirical work for this project, for instance?

SE: I'm thinking of it as a book, and after I finish this Foucault book it may be what's next. I can see how I can complete the Foucault book alongside other commitments. I can see how I could complete a planned Shakespeare book alongside those other commitments. But this one — 'Earthing Geopolitics' or 'Grounding Geopolitics' or something along those lines — feels like the sort of thing I need a sabbatical year to work on. I think that's when I might try to do that. But, you know, there may well be pieces of it that get written along the way. Then I've already got some material to draw on. So I have a couple of talks that have not been published — the fossils talk, for instance — that could possibly find a way into that. I gave a talk on Lefebvre's concept of terricide and the geometrics talk I gave last year might also work. And the 'Secure the Volume' piece I published last year. So there is some material towards that.

As for the second question, it depends what you mean by empirical. The 'Volume' piece, for example, discussed a whole range of theoretical and empirical studies by others, and tried to develop a conceptual vocabulary to make sense of all this. But the talk was also illustrated by a number of photographs I'd taken when in Israel/Palestine — in Jerusalem, in the West Bank in places like Area E1, and on the border between Israel and Lebanon at Rosh Hanikra. Some of those images made their way into the published text, and I discussed the places as examples to show what I was doing with the analysis. I've also used some photographs I've taken from visits to Hong Kong and on the Hong Kong/China border in talks I've given on the relation of territory and the urban; or examples from the trips I made to Nigeria in lectures. The river boundaries work is informed by the work of the International Boundaries Research Unit at Durham,<sup>11</sup> who I used to work with; and they are now doing this work on ice

that I'll be involved with. I am thinking that there might be a discussion of urban spaces in this project, and what I do in New York with CUSP may link to that. So there will certainly be engagements with specific places to illustrate the themes, and in that sense it will likely be more empirical than much of my work, though *Terror and Territory* has elements of this kind of work too.

DL: In a recent article 'Does the City Have Speech?', Saskia Sassen posits that the *terrain vague* — 'an under-utilised or abandoned space that lies forgotten among massive structures and construction projects' — can provide disempowered people in cities with a possibility to reconnect with their city and with one another. What possibilities for resistance and empowerment in the less regulated, contested parts of contemporary cities do you think still exist? How do the shifting boundaries and power relations of cities figure into your current research on territory and urbanism?

SE: I don't know that article by Saskia Sassen, so I can't talk about that particular piece. But I do know some of her recent work, and she's got a recent book called *Expulsions*. It's a book that picks up on a number of things that she's been writing about recently, like land grabbing, what she calls 'the unbundling of territory', the territory–sovereignty relation being broken apart in different ways and so on. It's not surprising to hear that she's also done some of that work in terms of the city given some of her previous work on those types of questions. I think there are some interesting things to be done on what you might call different ways of utilising spaces in the city. There are ways that we are supposed to experience the city, ways that we are regulated in terms of flows that are allowed, flows that are channeled through particular spaces, say transit areas and so on. There are particular routes that authorities want people that are traveling to take. Then there are a whole set of other routes that people that are involved in maintenance, cleaning and security will use. It's kind of like the aristocracy's old houses, where you'd have

all the servants' corridors and quarters hidden away and you would have that all existing in the same overall space of the building. But you would do it in such a way that people don't interlink unless they're actually supposed to. There's a little bit of that in how shopping centres are constructed, transit areas — train stations, subways and so on.

And there are people who are doing interesting work around, in a sense, the opening up of those standard spaces that you're not supposed to get into to. So people like Bradley Garrett, for example, who is a geographer at the University of Oxford, has written a book on exploring — what he calls 'place hacking' — the city. The title of the book is *Explore Everything*. A lot of this is him and other people doing this urban exploration-type thing, but again getting into spaces which exist to make cities possible, infrastructures. They expose some of these places that are closed and now entirely locked away, like the Mail Rail in London which is an underground railway that used to be used to deliver parcels and letters through the city. They're getting into this and opening it up as another space. Or you could look at abandoned bunkers for security purposes. So one of the things I tried to do in the 'Secure the Volume' paper, for example, was to think about how a lot of this work on vertical geopolitics, aerial bombardment, aerial surveillance and drone flights by people like Stephen Graham, Eyal Weizman, Peter Adey, Derek Gregory and others can connect up to some of this work on urban exploration, the underground, the subterranean. So it was an attempt to say, 'Okay, so we need to go up in that volumetric way of thinking about territory and space generally and we also need to go down: could you connect up these different literatures?'

So I think there are people who are thinking about those different ways of thinking about challenging and controlling and regulating cities that are different from the ways that organised power wants us to experience those kind of places. So there are projects looking at people who live underground,

who have reclaimed infrastructure as a different form of home or housing environment. Occupy was also an interesting phenomenon, in that 'occupy' is obviously a very spatial term. As far as I know, the only place that protestors didn't want to call it 'occupy' was in Israel, for obvious reasons. But occupying a space, a public space and reclaiming public space for the public. And one of the interesting things about the London one was the question of what was public space in that area? The place that they originally wanted to occupy was by the stock exchange and the Barbican centre, but they were denied that because it isn't public space, it's privately owned land. There are public rights to access it ordinarily, but these can be revoked and that's why they ended up at St Paul's Cathedral, because it was as close proximity to the space that they might have otherwise occupied.

So there are all sorts of interesting issues around that. I had a PhD student at Durham, Chaoqun Liu, who was working on public space as an issue and the question of land, particularly land rights, within cities. She was looking at London and Beijing to think about those kinds of questions. So there are people doing interesting work on this, although this is not particularly where my work is, other than that 'Volume' paper. But there are lots of potentials for these sorts of abandoned or reclaimed spaces. There's a specific word, 'spandrel', that architects use for small spaces that are left over after a building has been completed, like the gap between a curved arch and a rectangular frame. Could that work at a larger scale? So maybe there's some structural feature where its design leaves something almost like a void or vacuum-type space: could those be opened up and experienced in different ways?

DL: Recently in a public lecture, you mentioned that your project looking at territory in the plays of Shakespeare emerged as a potentially more 'fun' or accessible form of your ongoing research on territory. In a review of Joss Whedon's film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*,

James Glickman writes about how Shakespeare is more popular than ever on the stage, but his plays struggle to find a mainstream audience in film adaptations. On a similar level, perhaps, there is a very established discipline of Shakespeare studies, but this is a very focused, somewhat esoteric discipline that those outside of the field may not be able to relate to as easily.

How are you finding it to write about Shakespeare coming from a non-theatre/literature studies background? Are you aiming your project predominantly at literary scholars, or are you hoping that anyone who's interested in Shakespeare can get into the book regardless of their familiarity with research on his work?

SE: It's a tricky question and it's a fairly regular question about what an audience is for any type of work you do. I *hope* that the book will be read by Shakespeare scholars and recognised as a serious work of scholarship. That's certainly an aspiration, and in that it's not dissimilar to other work that I've done that has crossed where disciplinary boundaries supposedly are between things. I wrote my PhD largely on Heidegger and Foucault, but I was in a Politics department at the time. So was I going to be taken seriously by people in philosophy? I went to lots of philosophy conferences and eventually got to a point where I was able to speak at philosophy conferences about this material and these people didn't necessarily agree with me. But I did feel like I got to a point where they thought I was worth disagreeing with, if that makes sense. That it was worth engaging with what I was doing. Similarly, I wasn't trained as a geographer but I moved into engaging with debates within the discipline of geography and then ended up in a Geography department. I wanted my work to be taken seriously by people already in those debates. So it's a kind of balancing act because I don't want to write things that are so specialised that only people who are within that very narrow discipline of Shakespeare studies or whatever it might be will read. But equally I want to be taken

seriously by those people, that this isn't somebody who's just playing with the material or this isn't somebody who is careless. So with *The Birth of Territory*, there's a huge amount on the Middle Ages and I wanted to try and get to the point where... you know, I'm not a medievalist, that wasn't my training. I haven't got the language skills or the textual skills that real medievalists have. But I hope what I've done in that book is something that medievalists would find of interest and find some reason to engage with what I'm doing.

So again that's kind of what I'm thinking with the Shakespeare thing, is that I hope that Shakespeare people will take it seriously. I've given a few talks to more literary audiences including Shakespeare scholars and found a receptive audience to what I'm doing, even again if they might say 'oh, but you also need to look at this and there's this literature on that question, and how about this problem or this challenge or issue?' But they seem to so far find that I'm saying something that is worth engaging with. But most of the times that I've talked about the Shakespeare project have been to Political Science-type departments. I hope that I'm saying it in a way and I hope that I'm providing enough of a textual background that people not intimately familiar with a play are able to make sense of my argument. With some plays it's fairly straightforward — *King Lear*, say, or *Hamlet*. There's a good chance that most people — certainly brought up in an English-language education system — will have some familiarity with them. *Macbeth*, certainly. With some of the others, *Titus Andronicus*, say, that's a much less well-known play. Some of the history plays: *Henry V* tends to be quite well known, *Richard II* perhaps less well known. *The Tempest* is again fairly well known, but not so many people know *Pericles*. So there's kind of a balance between talking about plays that people are likely to be familiar with and then talking about less well-known plays that I think are important in thinking about those kind of questions.

Some of that changes, though. So *Coriolanus*, for exam-

ple, was a relatively neglected play until there was the Ralph Fiennes film version recently. So there was a big Hollywood-style treatment of that, and then recently there was a London performance of the play with Tom Hiddleston as Coriolanus. That was shown as part of the National Theatre Live in cinemas, so I actually saw it here in Melbourne. And with an actor of his stature — he'd just played *Henry V* for the BBC in 'The Hollow Crown' series, so he has quite a lot of public attention. He's also in the *Thor* films and *The Avengers*, so he has a big Hollywood status as well. I think those two together — the Ralph Fiennes and the Tom Hiddleston versions of *Coriolanus*—have made that play much more familiar. When I first started writing on *Coriolanus*, it was a less well known play. So I think there's definitely an audience out there of people that are interested in Shakespeare who aren't just Shakespeare scholars. The trick is to reach that audience but to not do it in such a way where Shakespeare scholars don't take it seriously. If I can pull that off then it'll do what I want. But that's going to be a tricky balance because I think a lot of Shakespeare textual scholarship is so detailed that it probably wouldn't appeal to that wider audience. And yet if you write something that appeals to a wider audience then you risk not being careful enough with the textual, contextual, linguistic elements. So it's keeping those things in balance that is going to be the difficult thing ... we'll see how I go.

DL & SJ: Thanks very much for talking to us, Stuart, and taking the time to answer our questions, and best of luck with your future projects!

SE: A pleasure. Thanks for the thoughtful and interesting questions.

- 1 These are the Meridian Book Award for Outstanding Scholarly Work in Geography and the Globe Book Award for Public Understanding of Geography, respectively. See: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/insite/news/warwickpeople2013/elden\\_book\\_award](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/insite/news/warwickpeople2013/elden_book_award)
- 2 See: <http://www.exploringgeopolitics.org/mnb/stuart-elden-the-birth-of-territory/>.
- 3 For more details of this book, and the source of this quote, see Elden's blog page on the project: <http://progressivegeographies.com/future-projects/shakespearean-territories/>.
- 4 See: <http://progressivegeographies.com/future-projects/foucaults-last-decade/>.
- 5 Biographical details of Elden's life — as well as some interesting, quite detailed insights into his background and practices as an academic — can be found in the following interview with him from 2011: <http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/03/new-apps-interview-stuart-elden.html>.
- 6 See: <http://www.thepolisblog.org/2014/01/stuart-elden-interview.html>.
- 7 See: <http://www.progressivegeographies.com/>.
- 8 A recording of this lecture can be found at: <http://progressivegeographies.com/2014/03/17/foucaults-la-societe-punitive-audio-recordings-of-melbourne-lectures/>.
- 9 To read the text of this interview, visit: <http://societyand-space.com/material/interviews/interview-with-lukasz-stanek-about-henri-lefebvre-toward-an-architecture-of-enjoyment-and-use-value-of-theory/>.
- 10 For more details about this project, visit: <http://www.hudsonyardsnewyork.com>.
- 11 For more information on this project, visit: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/ibru>.

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## Notes

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Suneel Jethani is a PhD candidate and lecturer in the media and communications program in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Suneel has an undergraduate degree in genetics and post-graduate qualifications in both marketing and media and communications. His current research looks at technologies that assist perception and track activity with a focus on their relationship to politics of space, time and body in the network epoch. His broader research interests include: critical disabilities studies, locative media, sensory studies, science and technology studies, philosophy of body and new media art. Suneel has published work in *M/C Journal* and *The International Communication Gazette*.

Dale Leorke is a PhD candidate in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. His thesis examines location-based gaming and play in public space, critiquing the discourse around games and artistic projects that use mobile and locative media to bring digital play into physical spaces. His work has been published in *Digital Culture & Education*, *International Communication Gazette*, *First Monday*, *Space and Culture* and the *Society and Space* open blog. His most recent work can be found on his research page: <http://unimelb.academia.edu/Daleleorke>.

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The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

The Research Unit plays a role in facilitating scholarship, enhancing research opportunities and enabling collaborations between creative industries, cultural institutions, research institutions, academic research centres and public communities. It houses a number of collaborative research projects across various disciplines, such as: education for a multicultural society; digital networks and participatory public space; art as a platform for global culture; transnational cinema practices; aesthetic cosmopolitanism; mediated public spaces; and cultural citizenship.

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Exercises in the history of ideas:  
an interview with Stuart Elden

Dale Leorke & Suneel Jethani

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Stuart Elden is Professor of Political Theory and Geography in the Politics and International Studies department at Warwick. This interview with Elden was conducted by Dale Leorke and Suneel Jethani in March 2014 during a visit to Melbourne. It begins with a discussion of his approach to researching, writing and reading texts in multiple languages. It then focuses on his relationship with the philosopher Henri Lefebvre and the ongoing relevance of Lefebvre's work. Lastly, it focuses on Elden's current research projects, including his work on Foucault, geopolitics, territory in the plays of William Shakespeare, and the relationship between territory and urban space.

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