The culture of land and the territorial state

According to Saint-Simon, Louis XIV on his deathbed expressed regret about the pain caused others by his overwhelming passion for building and war. For Saint-Simon, this was only a passingly sympathetic moment. He was more concerned about the suspect moral character of a king who would inflict so much suffering on his people to follow his own passion, and who would wait until death to renounce his weakness. The deathbed confession was followed soon in Saint-Simon's diary by the descriptions of the general glee in France and throughout Europe that followed the announcement of the king's death – a mirror, we suspect, of the author's own elation.¹

Saint-Simon's contempt aside, Louis XIV's confession was more than an act of moral purging by a king distressingly prone to set out monuments to himself and seek military reasons to erect them. It pointed to a shift of attention to the built environment as a site for political action. Building and war were particularly potent tools for constructing a territorial state over which Louis XIV could be absolute monarch. In seventeenth-century France, government transformation of the French landscape – with the construction of fortresses, factories, garrisons, canals, roads, and port cities – imprinted the political order onto the earth, making it seem almost an extension of the natural order. Political power in this moment was not just invested in the bureaucracy and Colbert's supposed rationalization of taxes, laws, and the military, but was also embedded in reconstituted social relations to “nature” that we in the West work from (and against) today.

Part of what Louis XIV so passionately wanted to build and what he wanted to fight for in war was an uncontested and identifiable political location for accumulating and exercising power: a territorial state. His passion for building and war was part of a desire for domination, a lust for power, that he shared with many political leaders before and since, but his ambitions took on a shape, a trajectory, that was not so historically constant. In the emerging system of European geo-politics, building and war were particularly material means for mobilizing landmasses and artifacts as political resources. Appropriately, the French military engineer, Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban, was a major architect of this new, territorial France. He constructed a great string of fortress cities around the perimeter of the country, holding the state's land within a ring of artificial barriers located primarily where natural features did not
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already neatly mark or protect state boundaries. Great earthworks and diversions of rivers were part of his schemes; the conquests of the French army were not just marked on maps, but dug into hillsides and dredged along waterways, transforming French borders into physical features of the landscape. The French countryside was made into a recognizable political space to help define France as a singular power.

The techniques used to transform French land into a site for politics were perhaps surprisingly showcased in the formal gardens around the royal residences, particularly Versailles. In these parks, aesthetic displays of control over natural forces yielded stunning visual effects that dazzled foreign visitors from throughout the world. But the gardens were not just marvels to transfixed the viewer; they were laboratories for and demonstrations of French capacities to use the countryside as a political resource for power. In grading the earth to make terraces, they showcased military engineering techniques for which France was becoming renowned. At Versailles, the gardens acquired a water system even more elaborate than—it still based on the same principles as—the one joining the hillsides around Paris to serve that city’s growing needs. The statues in the royal gardens were commissioned and designed by Le Brun to be exquisite exemplars of French taste and fashion that could mark what was French with a distinctive style. Even the flower-beds with their complex patterns inscribed models of French design onto the land itself, significantly using imported exotic plants that testified to the reach of French trading networks. No wonder the gardens became sites of diplomatic rituals and celebrations of war victories, where territorial engineering and design could be made manifest to foreigners and locals alike as a basis for determining what was France. In the microcosm of the garden, the tools of French land-based politics were revealed in all their glory.

Versailles was a model of material domination of nature that fairly shouted its excessive claims about the strength of France. The great château and gardens were crafted and then represented in printed propaganda and pictures as marvels, wonders of the world, that were testimony to the greatness of the monarch who built them. The gardens housed collections of rare shells, plants, rocks and statues that made manifest the geographical and cultural reach of the French state. They served as stages for elaborate fêtes and rituals that, while celebrating the monarch, flaunted the political discipline of the aristocracy under this regime. Wonders and riches of nature were packed into this miniature realm to suggest all that would lie in the French countryside beyond. Versailles was an elaborate earthwork, import depot, and architectural feat, a dramatic piece of material culture that was born of a passion for building and war placed in the service of the accumulation of power within the territorial state.

The material culture of the territorial state

To create the modern state, a centralized bureaucracy to claim and manage a vast and complex territory, place and power had to be allied in a new way. In the old system, leaders dominated land by linking a radiating network of power centers – fortresses, towns or cities. These centers regulated trade, maintained military routes, standardized political relations, and afforded protection from invaders. It had worked well for
empires that stretched over vast distances; the newly captured margins of such territories could be reached, if not fully managed, through the network of centres. State territory was different; it was more clearly bounded and closed, and it could be more immediately controlled. If the land of empires was known by its power centers and expansiveness, the land of the state was known by its boundaries; it was the product of a kind of political “enclosure” movement that identified a particular, marked part of the European continent with the state. Any ambiguity about the placement of its boundaries was welcomed as an opportunity to go to war. France, as a political location, needed a standing army to guard its borders; it had to be measured precisely in latitude and longitude by the scientists of the observatory; it required surveying and recording on maps by military engineers and cartographers; it had to be integrated by canals, roads, and bridges and had to have its land drained and improved to give it wealth; it required managed forests, harbors, arsenals, and shipyards to support a navy; and, for all this, it needed to be shaped and reshaped on the battlefield so its boundaries would be grand and clear to everyone. Like the Roman Empire, France was as much an engineering feat as a political one. Unlike the Roman Empire, the territorial state mobilized a more contained and controllable parcel of land, whose resources could be explored and displayed in new ways. Controlling land through war and engineering was a strategy for gaining power that was not without precedent, but was resuscitated to new ends in the political culture of early modern France. It led to a rash of experiments in building and war that transformed a landmass into a new kind of political resource.

The existence of a political culture of territoriality in early modern Europe would be easy to overlook as ahistorical or unremarkable (and hence easy to erase from French history), if one assumed that humans were by nature territorial creatures or that they always held feelings of political ownership about places. But neither of these static views of power and place would explain the shifts in cartography that appeared in Europe during the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. Surveyors began to be commissioned in growing numbers to make ever more detailed images of states and estates, using new measurement techniques and modes of cartographic rendering. The results were often treated as much more than repositories of facts. Some were used to plan wars, build canals, or organize forests. Others simply pointed to the importance of their contents with elaborate decorations, including signs of the powers inherent in nature and pictorial inventories of the social and natural resources of the mapped regions. The desire for careful measurement of topography was itself a tribute to the growing importance of land and its systematic use in the period. It was not that people had not surveyed before or cared about their domains and fields. Certainly the Doomsday Book in late medieval England was a dramatically complete land inventory. But something changed during the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. Lines of demarcation across the earth took on new significance. Before that time domains were certainly politically significant landholdings, but they were identified by their centers more than their peripheries. Old maps were marked with castles and towns, centers of commerce and social action, and with the rivers, roads and seas along which one could pass from center to center. The newer maps of the sixteen and seventeen centuries were
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different. They started to mark boundaries with clear lines (and to use color changes to emphasize them). Grid structures on maps were revived from Ptolemaic sources and were used not only to measure the earth in scientific terms but to locate borders more precisely.  

While in England surveyors most often made maps of estates for economic purposes, in France the vast majority of them did map-making for military or other institutions of the state. Louis XIV shared with other French military leaders an obsession with political maps and models; they filled their châteaux with maps and globes that described, not so much their own private land holdings, but either political territories of foreigners (friends or enemies) or land that they had annexed in war. In addition, they had constructed the most terrifyingly elaborate models of their own and others' towns and fortresses that could be used for strategic planning; techniques for making these clay constructions were illustrated in books on fortress-centered warfare.  

Military books were joined on French shelves by primers written by surveyors on how to use triangulation techniques for warfare, linking the measurement of territory to the techniques for capturing more of it. At the end of the century, the government even contracted for a great national survey to be made to lay claim to and embody the territorial reach of the French state. The techniques of military control of land obsessed the entire nobility and pervaded the cartography of France during Louis XIV's reign.  

These political maps developed with and helped to constitute the territorial state.

French formal gardens as laboratories of power

In an odd way, one of the clearest (albeit not immediately obvious) expressions of the new political interest in land in the period lay with the massive gardens that began to be constructed around the great royal châteaux of France. The gardens in seventeenth-century France grew dramatically in size and cultural importance. They became highly articulated and deeply structured forms, emerging from châteaux as quasi-architectural features and continuing along pathways and beyond sculpted masses of trees toward the horizon. They delineated living spaces and ceremonial stages beyond the walls of buildings; they constituted a site for an aristocratic way of life that linked social standing to territorial control and the accumulation of property. It seemed that buildings in this historical moment were no longer large enough nor complex enough for the new cultural possibilities of the age. Something more was needed to contain the sculpture, fountains, and plants; a bigger stage was required for the elaborate fêtes (or even frequent but modest promenades or hunting parties) that were part of court ceremonial life. Not just buildings but land itself needed attention and celebration, requiring ingenious decorative strategies and engineering feats, and embodying new visions of natural order. Enormous energy and passion were harnessed to bring together garden designers, gardeners, trees, shrubs, sculptures, and water systems to facilitate a massive restructuring of hills and valleys. This kind of activity seemed so important that Louis XIV began building the great gardens at Versailles before he began expanding the château there. The political territoriality that developed in France in the period was simultaneously a form of material practice and of political representation.
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We tend to think of territorially as a state of mind, a way of feeling about a portion of land, but the territoriality that developed in seventeenth-century France was, first of all, a form of material practice, a way of acting on the land that helped to make it seem like France. Land was politically mobilized as territory in the period, using engineering skills to reshape it and in the process alter its meaning. Land was measured and fitted within the languages of maps so it could be carried on pieces of paper and made a public image; it was marked and bounded with military fortresses so its breadth would be visible and its relation to state power tangible; and it was suffused with humanly engineered waterways and roadways that gave it internal orderliness and tied it to an economic rationality that was also associated with the state. In all these ways and more, defining state territory for France and making it useful for the state was an activity, not the consequence of a propaganda campaign but the result of a new way of life in which the state intervened in the landscape and gave it new form. Land was not just seen in a new way in the seventeenth century; it was handled differently, and this made it represent simultaneously a new materialism and new political trajectory.

The territoriality of these gardens was visible enough. Seventeenth-century French formal gardens were much like the new maps of the period. They consisted of measured areas, organized internally, carefully bounded, marked by waterways and walkways, and filled with lines that simultaneously marked divisions and defined meeting points. Visual rhythms in the gardens were created by the relations of parterres (garden beds that looked like carpets), and the bosquets (or forest rooms filled with statues and waterworks) that lay beyond. Their geometries were used to integrate diverse elements into a common whole, a corporate or communal unity that transcended all the separate components that went into it. They were built from reappropriated land—farms, cemeteries, and even whole towns—that stood in the way of their formal designs. The finance minister from the early part of Louis XIV’s reign, Fouquet, commissioned at Vaux-le-Vicomte what was to become the prototype for all the French formal gardens. To fashion a grand enough tribute to himself and his power, he bought and tore down three villages, and employed 18,000 laborers to make his garden. Nothing short of major military campaigns were equal in their ambitions and consequences for the land. For his hubris and the corruption it represented to the king and Colbert, he was jailed, and his designers taken over by the young king who employed them to articulate at Versailles and other royal residences the new political power of France and its king.14

The importance of the gardens to Louis XIV’s reign was underscored by the itineraries written to direct visits to the gardens at Versailles. Some of the few pieces written in Louis XIV’s own hand were itineraries for promenades that he penned for use on diplomatic occasions; the king wrote these guides himself apparently because he placed great weight on the ritual tours of the park. The promenades were formal affairs, at which distinguished visitors were fed and entertained as they followed the prescribed paths through the gardens. What they did and saw in these circuits was somehow meant to inform their assessments of the king and his court. The promenades constituted an important, if obscure, means of doing politics in and for the new state.

In spite of their tantalizing importance to the king, the itineraries have been
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4. Plan of Turin, seventeenth century (Sr. G. Bailleau).