1 Centring the Margins

States, Borderlands and Communities

For all their apparent simplicity, maps make evocative statements about the way the world is – embellished, as they are with textual detail, colours, shading and the like. The maps of Africa that European merchants and explorers generated in previous centuries are so captivating to modern eyes precisely because they obviously distort size and shape – and famously fill in the empty spaces in inventive ways.[1] Contemporary cartography is less obviously idiosyncratic, but it harbours its own blind spots and pointed omissions – which becomes painfully obvious when actors are first confronted with the puzzling unfamiliarity of a map depicting a place they know intimately. As others have noted, maps are not innocent things, but have historically been associated with projects of state-making and enclosure in different parts of the world – including those bound up with empire.[2] The seductive power of maps resides in their normalizing character, which serves to close down alternative ways of seeing while authorizing particular modes of doing. In that sense, maps have been constitutive of power relations in their own right.

It follows that maps relate to the real world in a selective and differentiated manner. As James C. Scott indicates, the history of cadastral mapping in Europe was closely bound up with the desire to raise land-based taxes. This entailed striking a balance between the desire for uniformity and comparability, on the one side, and attention to local detail, on the other.[3] Given that most colonial states in Africa did not raise revenues from the land directly, they

[1] "So geographers, in Afric maps, With savage pictures fill their gaps, And o'er unhabitable downs, Place elephants for want of towns." from Jonathan Swift's, "On Poetry: A Rhapsody" (1733). For a collected volume that considers African maps in their historical context, see Jeffrey C. Stone (ed.), *Maps and Africa: Proceedings of a Colloquium at the University of Aberdeen, April 1993* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University African Studies Group, 1994).

[2] Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1997); and James R. Akerman (ed.), *Decolonizing the Map: Cartography from Colony to Nation* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2017).

[3] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 44–7.

tended to generate maps that were attentive to other kinds of detail.[4] The German Karte Von Togo of 1905, which I will have cause to return to, contains remarkable levels of detail on communal boundaries, farming activity and tree cover, but it never set out to delineate actual farms.[5] This is one reason why (as we will see) its utility in deciding subsequent land cases was rather circumscribed. Colonial maps like this one paid close attention to the location of tracks, roads and rail links embedded within a landscape defined by mountains, forests, rivers and plains: in other words, a set of logistical challenges to be resolved. In the 1950s, state mapping acquired a renewed lease of life in the service of something now called 'development'. Two decades later, as Survey departments tumbled down the administrative hierarchy, they devoted what resources they could muster to tracking the shifting contours of internal administrative borders. Other cartographic work was put on hold, leaving administrators to work as best they could with archaic maps or none at all. Surprisingly perhaps, the mapping of border regions was left in abeyance, storing up multiple ambiguities for the future. At the time of writing, the Survey department in Accra still dispenses sheets from a national map that was produced in the early 1970s at a time when innumerable towns and villages in Ghana did not even exist or were little more than hamlets.[6]

Statistical series manifest a comparable trajectory. In West Africa, as we will see, counting population became a veritable obsession for colonial regimes that had every reason to be concerned about the implications of high levels of cross-border mobility for revenues and labour supplies alike. After independence, government agencies collected specific kinds of economic data – for example, figures for industrial output and urban food price indices – but in a manner that was often based on more or less informed estimation.[7] Population censuses became more episodic and were often distinctly unreliable when they did take place. It speaks volumes that in Africa's largest country, Nigeria, the size of the population has been a matter of guesswork in the absence of

[4] Settler colonies like Kenya did produce cadastral maps, but not for revenue reasons.
[5] The twelve sheets of the 1905 map (1:200,000), which is attributed to Paul Sprigade, is available online at the Basel Mission Archives online. The close detail came from the on-the-spot inspection of the German Commissioner, Dr Hans Grüner. See www.oldmapsonline.org/map/bmarchives/27825.
[6] "Ghana" (scale of 1:50,000), map produced jointly by the Government of Ghana and the Government of Canada under the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Programme. It appears to date from 1974.
[7] On Africa's statistical deficit and its consequences, see Morten Jerven, *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do About It* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), and *Africa: Why Economists Get It Wrong* (London: Zed, 2015), ch. 4.

repeated and reliable census data. In a nutshell, we can discern a correlation between shifting state priorities, and capacities, and the propensity to make particular kinds of maps and to gather specific sorts of statistical data.

Although there is a close relationship between cartography and the exercise of state power, its techniques have been amenable to appropriation and its claims to authenticity have frequently been mimicked by societal actors. What is most revealing about land litigation across Africa is the proliferation of maps that parties have created for themselves, which often weigh more in the legal scales than the official ones. As a recent study by Julie MacArthur indicates, countermapping is nothing new.[8] Somewhere in between state cartography and countermapping lies the construction of mental maps, which typically do not have a didactic purpose and yet reveal an alternative spatial ordering. Mental maps differ from cartographic conventions in that they signal relationships of proximity that do not necessarily correspond to what is depicted on a physical map. Viewed from the geographical margins, which is the particular vantage point of this book, mental maps may include significant details that are entirely absent from state-centric cartography. This would include rotating markets and nodes within religious networks where, in each case, locations are related to each other in more or less stable patterns. When actors pursue their lives in accordance with these mental maps, they may challenge officially sanctioned versions of reality. State actors are conditioned to think in terms of a clearly bounded national space but are confronted by the realities of everyday connectivity, which persist even when the borders are officially closed. The manner in which official cartography ignores such connections – as reflected in roads that seem to trail off into blankness at the edges – has significant implications for even the best-intentioned interventions. For example, the advantages of tackling public health challenges from both sides of a given border might seem rather self-evident. And yet, it is actually rather rare for data to be collected, and to be mapped, across borders in Africa.

This is not primarily a book about maps, or indeed statistics, although they each receive their due in the pages that follow. But it *is* a study of the ways in

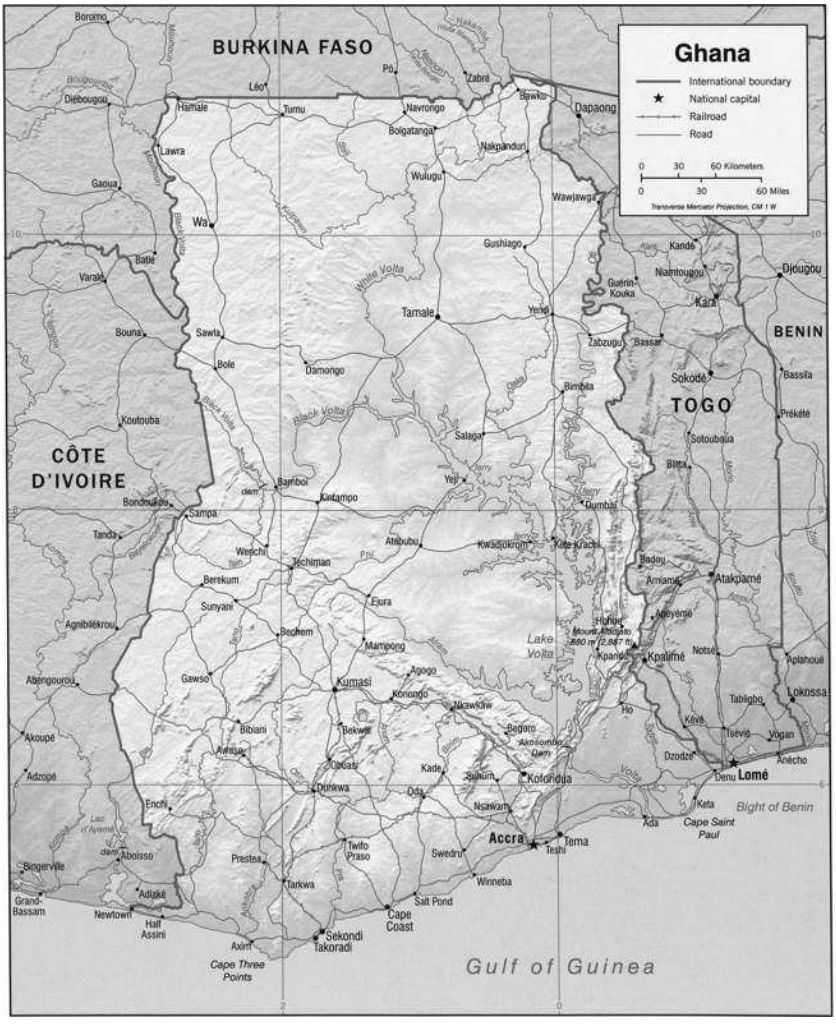
[8] Julie MacArthur, *Cartography and the Political Imagination: Mapping Community in Colonial Kenya* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), pp. 15–23. Her account has some striking resonances with the account of how pueblos in Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century insisted on generating their own maps to establish communal boundaries, rather than trusting in official cartography. Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 81–7. See also the discussion of countermapping in David McDermott Hughes, *From Enslavement to Environmentalism: Politics on a Southern African Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 130–8.

which states have sought to regulate border spaces and, in turn, how the dynamics unfolding there have helped to shape institutions and governmental practices alike. The subfield of borderlands studies works with mental maps of a sort, given that it is generally concerned not just with the exercise of state authority, but also with the interplay between populations residing on either side of the line. This book was initially conceived of as a contribution to borderlands scholarship but coming from the angle of comparative history. In an earlier monograph on the Ghana/Togo border, I argued for the proactive role of local populations in shaping the borders that ostensibly divided them – by virtue of their investment in smuggling networks and their active enlistment of state agents in disputes over land.[9] I subsequently set out to test the broader applicability of these insights by means of a structured comparison of populations living astride the Ghana/Togo and the Gambia/Senegal (Casamance) borders – on which more later (see Maps 1.1 and 1.2). But as the research took shape, I became increasingly interested in following the impact of border dynamics at some distance from the physical line of separation. Being struck by the very different language and practice of governance in the four countries concerned, I began to consider the possibility that the underlying differences might be rooted in border dynamics. What began as a hunch acquired greater direction as I delved deeper into the archives and followed up leads in the field. At the same time, I became intrigued by the multiple connections between borderlands and other kinds of spaces. This led me into aspects of urban history and, in the process, forced me to rethink my own approach to the study of borders. The upshot was that the revisionist inclinations that drove the initial research agenda have culminated in an altogether more ambitious work – one that is as much about states and cities as it is about borderlands.

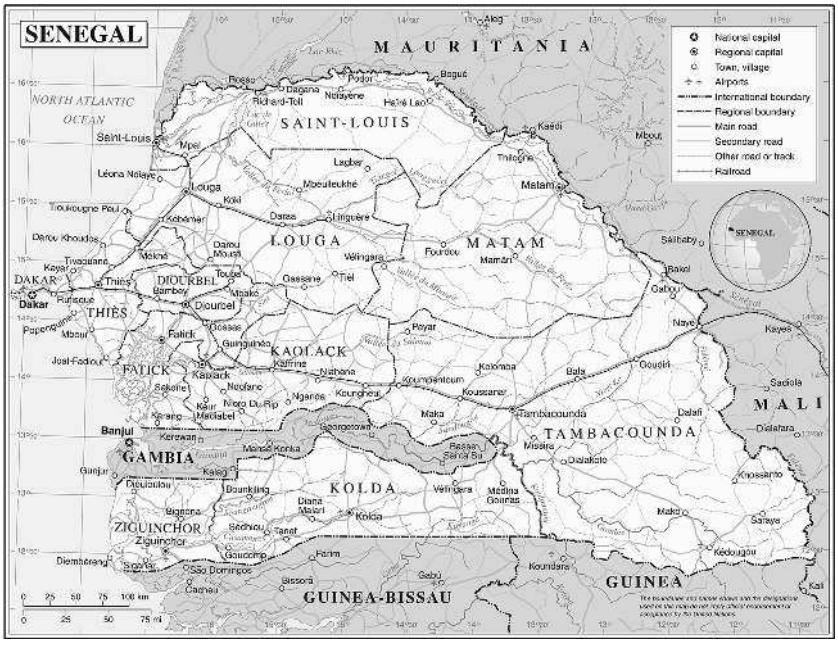
In this monograph, I maintain that the geographical margins have been productive in three respects: temporally, in that states were forged in the process of converting frontier zones into colonial borders; structurally, in that fiscal logics, which hinged on regulating border flows, fundamentally underpinned the morphology of colonial states and that of their post-colonial successors; and politically, in that the social contracts that were forged under colonial rule, and which were reconfigured after independence, hinged on the interchange between centres and the geographical margins. At the same time, I have remained loyal to aspects of the original borderlands agenda. I demonstrate that once colonial states became fully operational, they

[9] Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana–Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914* (Oxford and Athens: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 2002).

contributed to a context in which it was possible to rethink the meaning of community. I reveal how strikingly different patterns in the Senegambia and the trans-Volta were closely related to the ways in which states attempted to manage the circulation of commodities and the mobility of people across borders. Some aspects of my argument will seem more contentious than others, and in what follows I set out the parameters in greater detail.



Map 1.1 Ghana and Togo.



Map 1.2 Senegal and Gambia.

The Question of the State: Again

Given the orientation of this book, there would be a strong case for *not* starting with the state. My reasons for doing so are that it makes my agenda that bit easier to convey. The intention is not to privilege 'the state', but rather to put it firmly in its place – in every sense thereof. It is customary to begin such a discussion with a health warning about the perils of reification.[10] In a formulation that has been repeated, or nodded at, by many others down the years, Ralph Miliband once observed "that the state is not a thing, that it does not, as such, exist".[11] The implication is that 'it' cannot be apprehended directly or accorded agency in its own right. The same could, of course, be said of most of what constitutes the core business of the humanities and social

[10] Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, "Popular culture and state formation in revolutionary Mexico", in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994).

[11] Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), p. 49.

sciences, from kinship to gender. But this is, in a sense, the point that is being made. Historians, social scientists and political actors have all talked of 'the state' as if it *was* a discrete entity – or, to use Abrams' terms, something to be respected, smashed or studied.[12] This does, of course, raise the question of why scholars continue to refer to 'the state' in this way – whether that be a single thing or an assortment of things such as the 'failed state', the 'developmental state' or indeed the 'African state'. Part of the reason is that states – which "can accept no rival, no higher or even co-equal power"[13] – have laid claim to an exceptionalism that is generally denied to societal actors, and which has largely stuck. A Foucauldian reading, such as that favoured by Timothy Mitchell, considers the megalithic image of the state as a 'structural effect' of governance practices.[14] Although this begs many questions, it has the one great merit of interrogating in what sense the state really did come first. This is an issue that I take up in detail in the next chapters.

A discussion of borders is never very far from a consideration of state formation. The common presumption is that states define their borders. Indeed, the drawing of a boundary line, followed by its maintenance and surveillance, is considered to be the ultimate assertion of state sovereignty. The standard reference point is the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 that brought the modern state system into being in Europe. This had been preceded by extended bouts of warfare that are credited with the fashioning of the modern state. Many influential interpretations emphasize the transformative effects of war-making, which stimulated improved techniques of fighting, but also sustained the imperative of building more predictable revenue streams.[15] As methods of revenue extraction improved, so the argument goes, the 'tax state' gave way to the properly 'fiscal state', of which Britain became the most developed, if not

[12] Philip Abrams, "Notes on the difficulty of studying the state (1977)", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1) 1 March 1988, p. 59. It is revealing that the same complaint is current decades later. See, for example, Douglas Howland and Luise White, "Introduction: sovereignty and the study of states", in Douglas Howland and Luise S. White (eds.), *The State of Sovereignty: Territories, Laws, Populations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 2.

[13] Peter J. Steinberger, *The Idea of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 37.

[14] For Mitchell, trying to define the boundaries of the state is a fruitless exercise because the illusion of the state as something apart is one of effects "of detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification and supervision and surveillance". Timothy Mitchell, "The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics", *American Political Science Review* 85 (1) 1991, p. 95; and "Society, economy and the state effect", in G. Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[15] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), ch. 3; Richard Bonney (ed.) *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe, c.1200–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For the British case, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

the original, exemplar.[16] This was reflected in an institutional elaboration of the state (density) and its intrusion into all aspects of life (reach). But as European states maximized their revenues, it is said, they were forced to enter into bargains with sections of their own populations – initially landed elites and urban merchants – about who paid, how much and for what purposes.[17] As Martin Daunton indicates, whether there was compliance or opposition hinged critically on the nurturing of relations of trust. Tax systems functioned best when governments trusted citizens to pay, and when citizens could rely on each other to comply and on government to deploy the resultant revenue wisely.[18] As tax systems became more fully elaborated over the nineteenth century, the number of people who might be counted as fully-fledged – and hence taxable – citizens increased. Moreover, producing cadastral maps, enumerating populations and physically extracting revenues were themselves exacting processes that added to the administrative complexity of the state, at least where these were carried out with any degree of efficiency. But there was always a heavy element of contingency at work, as Tilly indicates:

> Struggle over the means of war produced state structures that no one had planned to create, or even particularly desired. Because no ruler or ruling coalition had absolute power and because other classes outside the ruling coalition always held day-to-day control over a significant share of the resources rulers drew on for war, no state escaped the creation of some organisational burdens rulers would have preferred to avoid.[19]

Needless to say, this less-than-linear process was never part of the 'official transcript' of state-making – although it was often reflected in renditions of popular sovereignty.[20] Although European history has been written as a merry dance of war and taxes, it could equally well be retold as a history of boundaries and state-making. On the one hand, the imperative to wage war was largely driven by territorial imperatives that culminated in the conversion of contested frontier regions into fixed boundaries. On the other, the

[16] Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1799–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[17] Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988); Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, and *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914–1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). An instructive case is that of Risorgimento Italy, where Piedmont's struggle against Austria was reflected in higher levels of military expenditure than the other states and, correspondingly, higher levels of taxation. But in the context of parliamentary control of the budget, increased taxes on merchants were associated not only with greater military expenditure, but also with greater outlays on infrastructure that served military ends and those of commercial elites equally well. Mark Dincecco, Giovanni Federico and Andrea Vindigni, "Warfare, taxation and political change: evidence from the Italian Risorgimento", *Journal of Economic History* 71 (4) 2011.

[18] Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan*, pp. 10–13.

[19] Tilly, *Coercion*, p. 117.

[20] I am borrowing the 'official transcript' from James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

development of elaborated tax systems required paying greater attention to where the writ of the state actually ran. As Peter Sahlins indicates in his study of the French–Spanish border, the state was actively made at the margins as much as it was a projection outwards from the political centre.[21] In addition, as Sahlins also demonstrates, the process of boundary-making was incremental, and hence state interventions were thoroughly intertwined with local dynamics. This is precisely the kind of case that I wish to advance in relation to the fashioning of colonial states in West Africa.

But before proceeding any further, I should be explicit about my own position on the question of states as an object of research. First of all, and at the most basic level, states may be seen as *ensembles of interlocking institutions* that demand compliance in the performance of functions that serve to constitute a political community. These institutions generally have a focal point, typically a capital city, and a series of notionally subordinate centres that are spatially and hierarchically arranged.[22] An example would be Asante, which, as Ivor Wilks has demonstrated in abundant detail, underwent a process of institutional elaboration in Kumasi in the later eighteenth century, at the same time as the provinces were more effectively bound to the centre through a system of 'great-roads' and a hierarchy of political offices.[23] States such as Asante paid close attention to revenue collection, which was fundamental to the maintenance of military dominance over their neighbours. Secondly, I follow much contemporary usage in referring to the *idea of the state* – or what is sometimes called the *state imaginary*.[24] This turns on certain shared expectations of what states are supposed to look like and how they are expected to behave – which is generally validated with reference to other states. States claim to exercise a right of command that notionally cascades downwards from the notional 'centre' and radiates outwards to the territorial margins, underlining the valence of both space and scale.[25] Inevitably, there is

[21] Peter Sahlins, "The nation in the village: state-building and communal struggles in the Catalan borderland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries", *The Journal of Modern History* 60 (2) 1988. See also his more expansive study, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1989).

[22] In some cases, as in Ethiopia for long periods, the capital could be mobile.

[23] Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chs. 1–2.

[24] Abrams, "Notes", p. 75. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, "Introduction: state of imagination", in Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (eds.), *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

[25] Within critical geography, *space* and *scale* have been problematized as organizing concepts in large part because they are bound up with the state's own ordering logics that have been destabilized by processes of globalization. John Allen and Allan Cochrane, "Assemblages of state power: topographical shifts in the organization of government and politics", *Antipode* 42 (5) 2010; Neil Brenner, "The limits to scale? Methodological reflections on scalar

also a considerable amount of performativity attached to keeping up appearances, which tends to be especially pronounced at international borders – especially the most militarized ones – where it is considered necessary to create a discursive distance from the neighbouring entity.[26] The greatest challenge to state-builders comes from those who reject the terms of the state imaginary – either because they hold to an alternative idea of the state, as secessionists do, or because they can imagine belonging to a political community that lacks any such presumption of hierarchy, as with James C. Scott's highland anarchists.[27] While imposing the writ of the state by force is always an option, maintaining its mystique is fundamental to securing compliance from those who are governed – as well as from those who populate its institutions. But to focus exclusively on the *idea of the state* is to grasp only part of what is at stake. A third element, the *materiality of the state,* is every bit as fundamental to the overall package. In Scott's analysis, it is the instruments of calibration and extraction that are fundamental to the functioning of states everywhere. Scott's point is that pre-colonial states were not that different from colonial ones, or contemporary iterations of the post-colonial state, in that they all endeavoured to (forcibly) settle mobile populations, to render them 'legible' and thereby to extract revenue. He writes that:

> Such coincidences of policy across several centuries, and in the modern period, across very different types of regime, is prima facie evidence that something fundamental about state-making is at work.[28]

And on the specific imperative of taxation, he observes that:

> An efficient system of taxation requires, first and foremost, that the objects of taxation (people, land, trade) be made legible. Population rolls and cadastral maps of productive land are the key administrative tools of legibility.[29]

Maps, on this view, are all about establishing legibility. But modern states also leave so many other visible traces. Offices, files, uniforms and flags do not merely function as symbols, but actually help to make the claims to authority real. Offices are not merely spaces enclosed within physical walls but are

structuration", *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (4) 2001; Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Here I have chosen to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Although I am mostly concerned with issues of space and processes of respacing, I have not entirely abandoned questions of scale.

[26] See Ravina Aggarwal, *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[27] Scott deals with the long-term – and ultimately doomed – efforts by stateless peoples in the mountainous regions of Asia to defend themselves against the advance of paddy states from the valleys below. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

[28] Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 79.

[29] Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, p. 91.