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


tended to generate maps that were attentive to other kinds of detail. 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. 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. 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. 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.
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. 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

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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 enlist-
ment 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 compari-
son 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 possibil-
ity 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 under-
pinned 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
maintain 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.
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. 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”. 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 sciences.

Map 1.2 Senegal and Gambia.


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

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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”.


8 Centring the Margins: States, Borderlands and Communities

the original, exemplar. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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
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 associ-
ated 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
20 I am borrowing the ‘official transcript’ from James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of
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


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


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. 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. 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.

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.

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

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28 Scott, Art of Not Being Governed, p. 79.
29 Scott, Art of Not Being Governed, p. 91.