

# Playing with Exclusionary Logics: Alternative Spatio-Temporal Understandings

Written by Aoileann Ní Mhurchú

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AOILEANN NÍ MHURCHÚ, FEB 5 2016

For several decades there have been a growing number of texts which seek to draw attention to the need for those studying international relations to engage with (and ultimately interrogate) received spatial and temporal understandings about where 'politics' is to be found (e.g. Edkins 1999; Walker 1993, 2010). Such research seeks to draw attention among other things to the effects of our specific (rather than natural) understanding of politics – as a clearly defined space and temporally progressive realm. In particular, it seeks to draw attention to how this spatio-temporal understanding informs, and thus limits, the way in which we envisage the world, the way we envisage what can be done in the world, and the way we articulate the possibility for 'alternatives'. This article considers briefly why this received spatially distinct and temporally progressive understanding in international relations is associated with exclusionary logics. It reflects then upon how alternative spatio-temporal logics provide different ways of thinking about politics by playing with (rather than dispensing with) exclusionary logics.

### Where Is Politics and When Is Politics in IR?

Politics in the received spatial and temporal understanding in IR is synonymous with a linear process and with the importance of 'progress'; this is to point out that politics is seen as unfolding in a progressive manner through economic development, cultural progress, and modernity. Politics is furthermore understood to take place within a bounded space defined territorially (such as within a nation-state) or institutionally (such as within Intergovernmental bodies or NGOs). Space outside these territorial and institutional boundaries is seen as anarchic at worst or at best merely beyond politics. For example, debates abound in international relations over the extent to which legal, social and economic institutions exist in the international realm. Yet the association of politics *with* these institutions and thus with demarcated institutional space is not questioned *per se*. To draw on the words of RBJ Walker (2010: 98) who was one of the first writers to actively pursue using space and time as the basis of a perspective for rethinking IR: we are trapped within an understanding of the need to construct politics 'within borders and limits', between the individual, the sovereign state (the national), the system of sovereign states (the international), and the world. The present resides here in the sovereign state and the system of sovereign states (with its associated institutions and territorial boundaries), and the future resides in the world more broadly and in the ability to unlock the potential of the world.

The main problem with this received spatial and temporal paradigm is that it doesn't engage usefully with the *intertwined* nature of the national and international, the international and the world, the present and the past, and associated realms of the subnational and the international, the self and other, the human and non-human etc. Put another way, it makes engagement and understanding of relational ontology – a world of interconnectedness or being-with – very difficult. What is explored and focused upon within the received spatial and temporal understanding in international relations is a world made up of distinct objects or entities that relate to one another in various ways; the emphasis is on how 'we' – as individuals and groups of individuals – can live more harmoniously, more peacefully, more democratically within existing sub, national and supra-national communities.

Yet, seeing politics as being made up of units (which intersect but which remain separate) in this manner assumes ideas of separation across and exclusion between people, nations, units within the international system as a starting

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point for any possible politics. From this perspective, our starting point is always to ask how we can come together *across* these subnational, national and supra-national divisions; this reifies narratives of separation and exclusion therefore and ignores potentially the ways in which these levels and forms of being are always already intertwined as “fragments and linkages differently integrated in different places” (Bateson 1990: 157; see also for example, Closs Stephens and Squire 2012 who talk about ‘politics as a web’).

We might reflect on a contemporary issue such as the increasing numbers of refugees in the world today, to unpack this a little bit. Talk of refugees fleeing wars and crossing borders, and washing up on European shores draws on the received spatio-temporal understanding and foregrounds the idea of a chaotic international arena with a no man’s land which must be negotiated by these people in their attempt to secure entry into a state. What it foregrounds is the question of how people can be made part of another existing bounded political community when they are forced to flee from their own state. It is in this manner that politics is seen as enabled within states or groups of states (such as the European Union). The emphasis is on what is politically possible within these spaces in the present and the future. Driving these discussions are reflections about how such integration has in the past ‘failed’ within these community spaces – linked increasingly to the so called ‘second generation’ of migrants who are seen to be growing up without sufficient political identity and belonging to their birth communities for a variety of socio-economic reasons (e.g. Leiken 2012).

What this downplays, however, are the historical and spatial interconnections across the ‘the national’, ‘the international’ and ‘the individual’ in a variety of ways, including most notably through colonial histories of many European states. These interconnections are ones which link the present situation and location of refugees – for example on the borders of Europe seeking asylum – to actions undertaken by European states at the international level through colonialism which had specific effects on individuals around the world to bind them to those states through (past and ongoing) social and economic relations. The growing current cry of ‘We are here because you were there’ (see Counterfire 2015; Vargas 2014) seeks, among other things, to historically contextualise the present asylum condition; it foregrounds interconnections between the national, international and individual as a starting point for thinking about political identity and belonging by emphasizing the historical connections between the individuals who are seeking asylum and regularisation from Western states and the past colonial enterprises by said Western states. This locates political identity and belonging outside of the nation-state’s current borders and its present actions, binding it instead to the past, and to question of actions undertaken elsewhere. It furthermore repositions the so-called second generation, no longer leaving them as people who are simply successfully or unsuccessfully ‘integrated’ into a single state. Instead the so-called second generation are repositioned in the middle of a series of complex ties which link them to multiple histories as well as to multiple levels of integration globally through their parents and grandparents and other ancestors (Ní Mhurchú 2014; Kushnick 1993).

Put another way, this dominant linear temporal and spatially defined starting point is unhelpful for exploring the *uneven* haphazard, messy, fluid nature of political identity and belonging across ‘the national’, ‘the international’ and ‘the individual’ levels which histories of colonialism bring to the fore. This is because politics is taken for granted to be unfolding in a progressive fashion within states and other bounded communities; politics is assumed “to be achieved in time and extended in space” (Closs Stephens 2010, p.32) by being enacted by or undermined *within* bounded institutions and communities. The politics that unfolds *across* them, intersecting them with historical and extra-territorial geographical ties is therefore much harder to see, to consider/reflect upon, and engage with from this spatio-temporal understanding.

## Disturbing the Logics of Exclusion

Yet what the latter points to is a form of politics linked increasingly to what Balibar calls ‘a composition of differences’ (Balibar 2012: 448); this is an understanding of politics not based within bounded spaces but a politics ‘formed *through* crossing borders: visible and invisible, internal and external’. Engin Isin (2002: 3-5) has coined the term ‘logic of alterity’ to describe such a starting point which ‘assumes overlapping, fluid, contingent, dynamic and reversible boundaries and positions’. He differentiates this from ‘a logic of exclusion’ which assumes ‘zero-sum, discrete and binary groups’. Isin argues that the former is much more useful for thinking through the ‘in flux’ (Isin 2008) nature of political identity and belonging and the ongoing struggles which have always to some extent defined, but also

# Playing with Exclusionary Logics: Alternative Spatio-Temporal Understandings

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increasingly now define what it is to be a political subject today. This is because it emphasizes how agents move *across* 'various positions within social space' (Isin 2002: 44) engaging in solardistic and alienating strategies in uneven ways, often simultaneously. This is to tell a story 'which either def[ies] or at least complicate[s] the space-time of the nation-state' in which the received linear temporal and distinct spatial understating of IR is most linked to (Closs Stephens and Squire 2010: 434).

The danger in differentiating a logic of exclusion from a logic of alterity is, however, that we presume that exclusionary narratives which are grounded in the former (ideas of discrete and binary groups) are moved beyond or dispensed with if we refuse such a logic as our starting point. In fact, they are played with rather than moved beyond. Instead of them being dispensed with, I want to draw attention to how ideas linked to exclusion (otherness, outside, binary ways of thinking) are played out in various unanticipated and intertwined ways given the emphasis on questions of irregularity, fragmentation, contingency and ambiguity.

## An alternative Supplementary Space

In his work which considers the experiences of postcolonial societies, Homi K Bhabha (1994), argues that national community and subjectivity is recast in colonial encounters to produce 'a space of doubling' which adds 'to' but does not 'add up' (ibid: 4). It works to disturb the existing calculation of a sovereign autonomous unit – of self (an individual), and of nation – by introducing fragmentation (fractions of personhood and of nationality). This 'space of doubling', which Bhabha associates with the space of the-less-than-one, is different to the space of plurality most notably as this latter space does involve the idea of adding various experiences together (linearity) in a coherent (spatially bounded) fashion to produce for example hyphenated identities at the individual level or the multinational nation-state at the national level and the multi-state European Union at the international level. This space of doubling instead challenges the idea of how we have been told we must exist politically *through* individuality (as individual units); that is, it challenges the way we have come to understand ourselves as sovereign subjects, to understand the state as a sovereign unit and the to understand the international system as made up of sovereign units. It is better envisaged as drawing attention to a supplementary space which, having disturbed the calculation of power and knowledge, 'produc[es] other spaces of subaltern signification'; these are spaces which intersect and cut across the individual, the national, the international and the world and the variety of inclusions and exclusions therein (Bhabha 1994: 162).

What this emphasis on 'disruption' (adding to but not adding up) and the production of fractions highlights in Bhabha's work is the ongoing importance of questions and processes of exclusion, binaries and otherness within this alternative supplementary space. What is enabled is recognition of the intertwining of key binaries such as inclusion/exclusion, past/present, national/international. The emphasis on disruption underscores that questions, experiences of exclusion, and otherness are not transcended in favour of alternative coherent identities or nations but rather they are brought to the fore as *part of* experiences of inclusion and engagement. What become quickly evident, however, are the contradictory ways in which these can be understood to play out. Rather than the politics of alterity pointing to or allowing us to think through the idea of an eventual cultural homogeneity and democratic anonymity articulated differently to but in the image of the bounded national community – such as a further amalgamation of states like the European Union – what is produced is 'an instantaneous and subaltern possibility of minority discourses that speak betwixt and between times and places'. These are forms of political identity and belonging which both challenge and reaffirm understandings of progressive national citizenship and belonging by both speaking the language of national citizenship and belonging – through cries which affirm 'we belong here to this state within this territorial boundary' – at the same time as they challenge national territorially defined belonging by appealing to transnational and extraterritorial links to this state which were produced through colonialism and by actions taken outside of the (Western or European) state boundaries in question. The point is that the politics invoked through alterity (awareness of the intersection of identity and difference across the individual, national and international) continues to involve processes of exclusion, binaries, otherness foreignness, strangerhood, un-belonging as well as inclusions, commonality, solidarity, unity, and belonging precisely because it invokes ideas of *crossing* borders (through journeys recently undertaken, journeys undertaken in the past by parents and grandparents, as well as journeys undertaken in the name of colonialism), living in borderlines and fluidity.

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The point then is that alternative spatiotemporal imaginations *play with* the existing logics of exclusion by making it impossible to reduce politics to either side of a binary. Rather than moving beyond it, they play with our understanding of 'exclusion' by enabling us to consider how 'exclusion' changes and shifts, thus undermining any fixed understanding of exclusion as either necessarily positive or negative; they enable us to consider how exclusion (for example, in the form of colonial imperialism) is linked to inclusion (in the form of ties forged through the colonial project and rights accorded under it); and how inclusions (in the form of current rights afforded under Western nation-state models) are linked to (historical) exclusions (regarding when and how those 'political communities' were developed through exploitative international practices).

## Trace: Crossing Borders/ Intertwined Politics

What inquiries into the logics of alterity, such as is found in Isin and Bhabha's work draw attention to that I want to stress is the significance of boundary lines in their own right as a *location* of and for politics. I have used the concept of 'trace' (Ní Mhurchú 2014) as a way of thinking through this understanding of politics as taking place *through* boundary lines. I use the concept of trace as an umbrella term for another starting point (called for by an increasing number of critical scholars now) to think about politics beyond linear time and spatial boundaries. It acts as a term to think about various alternative spatio-temporal concepts (such as hybridity, *milée* or being-with) which emphasises discontinuity, process and fragmentation, linked to the importance of tension and lines which intersect *across* the dualistic space of self/Other, national/international, present/future, nation/globe etc. A trace is defined in terms of its inability to fully replicate and therefore to fully mark out an identifiable object.

For Jacques Derrida, all signs have trace within them; this is the meaning generated from the difference that a sign has from other signs (especially the other part of the binary pair which it is made up of: e.g. national/international; past/present; self/other; citizen/migrant). Trace in other words is the mark of the absence of that which is always present (a presence) in the meaning of any sign. Trace then is something which shifts and slides by definition. Hall (2000: 150) notes that 'the trace is...something which still retains its roots in one meaning while it is, as it were, moving to another, encapsulating another, with endless shiftings, slidings of that signifier'. As such trace points to the process of simultaneous change and iteration (Ní Mhurchú 2014: 208-220). When we think in terms of traces, in other words, it is the mark which is made – which falls short of a clearly defined sign – which becomes the focus of analysis. The notion of trace is very useful for thinking about politics therefore outside of linear spatio-temporality because it emphasises the idea of politics as disruption rather than disruption 'into' (preexisting) coherent spatio-temporal political institutions, units of analysis or forms of Being.

An alternative spatio-temporal imagery in IR is thus an 'invitation to become lost in the world' (Closs Stephens 2011: 299) rather than an invitation to find a new path. Its labyrinth quality points to and brings to the fore the complexity of exclusionary narratives and logics; this complexity is suppressed when they are always presented as a natural starting point for questions about where and when politics is to be found in international relations. Attending to alternative images of spatio-temporality in international relations does not produce a more progressive politics in and of itself. Everyday experiences are what drive the need to rethink our spatio-temporal understanding in and of international relations, and these are not necessarily either politically progressive or regressive, but both. Yet if there is no solution in the turn to alternative spatio-temporal imagery, nor do they bypass the logics of exclusion, why should we take them seriously? What they enable us to consider, I have argued in this short piece, is how exclusion and associated concepts of foreignness, otherness, and difference do not only confirm existing assumptions regarding marginalisation. Rather, what I have looked at in this piece is how alternative spatio-temporal understandings help us to repeat and replay these to reveal instabilities in existing understandings about where the margins and centres are located (with the associated concepts of home, belonging and community), how they are negotiated, and what they imply.

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# Playing with Exclusionary Logics: Alternative Spatio-Temporal Understandings

Written by Aoileann Ní Mhurchú

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