



Ocean governance and maritime security in a placeful environment: The case of the European Union



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ABSTRACT

Adopting a critical geopolitics approach that accounts for the mutually reinforcing link between geo-informed narratives and projection practices, this article proposes that ocean governance and maritime security have translated into states' and regional organisations' increasing control over maritime spaces. This leads to a certain territorialisation of the sea, not so much from a sovereignty and jurisdictional perspective but from a functional and normative perspective. The article starts by discussing the ways oceans have been represented and shows that they are far from a placeless void, both in practice and in discourse. The article then frames the analysis of ocean governance and maritime security within critical geopolitics, and elaborates on the case of the European Union's narrative and practice. It concludes on the mutually reinforcing link between discourse and practice in the field of ocean governance and maritime security in general, and on the consequences for the EU in particular. Scholars working on ocean governance and maritime security are encouraged to challenge the traditional view that oceans are placeless.

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1. Introduction

The recent narrative and practice of ocean governance and maritime security have translated into states' and regional organisations' increasing control over maritime spaces. This has led to a certain territorialisation of the sea, not so much from a sovereignty and jurisdictional perspective but from a functional and normative perspective. This article aims at discussing the extent to which oceans are placeless or placeful and the significance in terms of ocean governance, via the compared analysis of both the narrative and the practice of the European Union (EU).

The article starts by discussing the ways oceans have been represented and shows that they are far from a placeless void, both in practice and in discourse. The next section then frames the analysis of ocean governance and maritime security within critical geopolitics, which accounts for the mutually reinforcing link between narrative and practice applied to the geographical space. The analytical framework is then applied to the case of the EU, by deconstructing its ocean governance and maritime security narrative and practice at the security, economic and environmental levels. The findings show that while the practice indicates that the sea is actually placeful and the narrative indeed justifies control, the narrative still consists in a mix of placeful and placeless representations.

2. Representing the oceans: void or place?

The sea has traditionally been represented as an unknown, hazardous, unpredictable, inhospitable, infinite, unregulated, lawless and, ultimately, uninhabitable milieu. Thus, in binary terms, the sea is constructed as the land's other. The fluid/liquid nature of water is opposed to the solid/static nature of the land. As stated by Anderson and Peter, "the sea's physical constitution renders it as intrinsically 'other'; it is a fluid world rather than a solid one. Our normative experiences of the world centre on engagements on solid ground; rather than in liquid sea" (2014: 5). In other words, the sea has traditionally been considered and represented as a placeless void, an 'empty' space outside of human and social experience. Sailors, fishermen and tourists experience the sea through the ship, which is the place of human experience, 'floating' on the blue void. This explains why human geography as an academic discipline has not been much interested in the sea, to the point that it has been defined as a "landlocked field" ([32]: 480). The ocean was "best left to the natural sciences" ([29]: 17). And the maritime space has thus traditionally been analysed as if placeless. For example, in their study of the strategic role of ports for cruise business Gui and Russo [31] postulates that "most part of [tourists'] experience happens in a placeless environment" (129). Their argument is based on the growing marginalisation of destination ports compared to the ships themselves, which are becoming the true destination place for tourists embarking on a

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cruise. The sea itself is not even considered as a likely place. In another example, Bush et al.'s [8] study on fishing and sustainability (2015) makes the postulate that oceans are placeless. They refer to oceans' relative inaccessibility and the abstracted ways in which one experiences them. They consider the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)'s attempts to create territories in the marine environment as abstract and placeless as well (resulting in "highly stylised, homogenising and placeless geography of the marine environment", 2–3). This is debatable, as UNCLOS could on the contrary illustrate a move towards placefulness, since it extends to the sea the political interactions and political/social realities found on land (such as borders, jurisdictions, etc.).

In his seminal book *the Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001), Steinberg deconstructs the narrative consisting in representing "ocean space" as a great void, which he considers "an attempt to annihilate the ocean" (166). According to him this representation has served the post-modern capitalism's interests by reducing the seas to an empty void through which capital and goods shall transit quickly and freely. The sea is indeed constructed as a "friction free surface across which capital can move without hindrance" (165). Gillis [30] links oceans' placelessness to their timelessness, since human geographers' disinterest for the sea mirrors in historians' traditional belief that "time began and ended at the edge of the land" (13), resulting in a lack of interest for the sea as a milieu. Interestingly, traditional naval scholars have mainly represented the sea as a mere lane of communication, which allows commerce to flourish and navies to protect the commerce and to reach any (land) place in the world (naval power projection), also emphasising on the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed at sea due to its natural characteristics. For Corbett, serving as a means of communication is even "the only positive value which the high seas have for national life" ([11]: 93). In sum, the underlying idea that the sea is placeless has been dominant in social science; the sea is an "anonymous" space ([36]: 143) devoid of social interactions and does not contribute to shaping identity beyond being a mere context for human, social and political interactions.

To consider that the sea is placeless, and especially to consider that the sea does not contribute to identity building and is an anonymous space devoid of any feeling of insideness, is Western-centred and does not take into consideration perceptions by other societies, including several indigenous societies (including some living within the territory of dominant Western societies). As stated by Anderson and Peters [1], who take the example of gift-giving rituals at sea in the Western Pacific, "despite Western culture's willingness to reduce the water world to an empty space, many 'indigenous' cultures refute this essentialism" (2014: 8). Gillis acknowledges the existence of a Pacific and Asiatic vision which differs from the Western one: "for Pacific islanders, the ocean is not a placeless place, but a sea of islands with its own unique geography. For them, history does not begin and end with land, but it is inextricably bound up with the sea itself" (2011: 17). In her study of the Sri Lanka's East coast, Lehman [33] demonstrates the centrality of the ocean in the region's armed conflict and during the 2004 tsunami. She shows how the ocean plays a fundamental role in the lives of the fishing community as a means of livelihood, "rather than through myth or legend" (2013: 492). While the sea is often depicted as being unpredictable (adding to the inhospitable argument playing in favour of its placelessness), the fisherfolks she interviewed seemed on the contrary to find the ocean very reliable. Similarly, in her ethnographic work on the people of Hudson Bay, Tyrrell [47] shows the extent to which "the sea is important, not only as an economic resource and as a means to travel and movement, but as a place where identity is formed, where memories are created, and where the history of the

community lives amongst the rocks, the seaweed and the ever-changing water" (222).

The identity argument is central to most reflections on the concept of place. In a general manner, the identity of fishing communities (who work on the seas and live by the sea) can probably be said to strongly relate to the sea. The sea is also linked to the identity of several other communities, who can feel a 'sense of place', such as professional sailors and, more strikingly, 'boat people'. Brstilo [3] discusses the case of Filipino sailors and shows that they constitute a "sea-based diaspora" the sea being a place of "human experience" for them (31). For migrants crossing the Mediterranean, risking their lives, the sea may be both a place of hope (leading to a 'better' life) and despair (facing dangers); a place of life and death, which becomes forcibly linked to their (evolving) identity, or at least to their identity as constructed by others. Indeed, in Western representations (for example in the media treatment of the current refugees/immigration crisis in Europe) migrants are associated with boats and their attempts at crossing the sea; their identity is often reduced to the act of crossing the sea (and dying at sea).

In sum, the sea is far from a void and can definitely be considered as a "social space" [16] or even as *placeful*. However, labelling the sea as placeless or placeful is a subjective act, since attributing a sense of place depends on one's values and perception. Placelessness is a relative concept: there is not *a* sea; the sea is not *a* place, but there are *several* seas; the sea is made of *various* places, which are not experienced in the same way. Thus, some parts of the sea are certainly not experienced as places. In other words, the sea can be placeless in some 'places' and placeful in others; the sea can be placeless for some people and not for others; certain parts of the oceans can be placeless for some actors and individuals, and not for others. It would be wrong to consider oceans as *one* place, as it would be wrong to consider the land as *one* place.

This article argues that states' willingness to govern the oceans and control the maritime domain has created various layers of human, social and political interactions related to, and within, the oceans. States represent the embodiment of public power; they are granted with, or claim, the right and responsibility to guide, constrain, monitor, control, and repress human activities at sea. This represents social interactions, which tend to play in favour of the argument that the sea is not placeless. Ocean governance and maritime security go beyond Steinberg's discussion of stewardship of the oceans (2001: 176–180). Stewardship is about resources management. Governance and maritime security is (also) about managing and controlling human activities in the maritime domain. Is it possible to govern something that is not a place? A placeless representation of the ocean may well, in theory, contribute to reducing incentives for stewardship, since it induces a lack of identity feeling and thus of care. On the other hand, the placeless narrative may not contradict the stewardship practice, since resource management is ultimately supposed to positively impact on individuals' well-being on land (via economic growth).

In practice, there has been a certain territorialisation of the sea, that is to say that states functionally extend their territory (for example via marine spatial planning) towards the high seas and exert a control over resources but also over human activities as far away from the coast as possible. In the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), which account for about 40% of the oceans, states have important jurisdictional powers, although mainly limited to economic rights. This seemingly pressing need to control the oceans is also found in the global dominant discourse about the maritime domain, especially in official documents but also in civilian stakeholders' narratives that insist on the need for more control so as to have security and good governance at sea. For example, the European Union's narrative stresses that economic growth cannot

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