



# Terrain as insurgent weapon: An affective geometry of warfare in the mountains of Afghanistan



Gastón Gordillo

Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC V6T 1A7, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 October 2017

Received in revised form

1 March 2018

Accepted 2 March 2018

Available online 10 March 2018

### Keywords:

Terrain

Materiality

Affect

Insurgency

Afghanistan

Korengal Valley

## ABSTRACT

The concept of terrain is one of the most important in our spatial lexicon but, with a few exceptions, has been under-analyzed in critical theories of space. In this essay, I propose a materialist and affective conceptualization of terrain that draws from first-hand accounts of warfare in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan, where the US military's power was undermined by the mountainous terrain and by the manipulation of this terrain by guerrilla fighters. Drawing from Spinoza and the turn to materiality in critical theory, I propose that terrain can be best analyzed through an affective geometry attentive to how bodies in motion are affected by, and affect, the terrain they are part of. In particular, I analyze the visual and textual material on warfare in the Korengal to argue that terrain can be conceptualized as a non-representable multiplicity of forms and objects that is irreducible to human experience and has the power to both constrain and enhance human action; that terrain is intrinsically opaque to human perception; that terrain has a processual, shifting materiality that is inseparable from the flux of the atmosphere; and that terrain's three-dimensional nature becomes most clear in the importance of controlling the higher ground in mountain warfare. This conceptualization of terrain reveals the microphysics of how insurgents weaponized the materiality of mountains and why an affective geometry of terrain matters in the analysis of insurrections.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The mountains around the Korengal Valley embody like few other places in Afghanistan why this country is known as “the graveyard of empires.” The American soldiers stationed in the Korengal between 2005 and 2010 called this place “the valley of death.” Journalist Sebastian Junger spent a year in the valley together with Tim Hetherington filming the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal*. He noted that soldiers dreaded the Korengal so viscerally that many wrote “damn the valley” on their weapons, in latrines, and on tattoos (Junger, 2010, p. 38). This spatial unease was the outcome of the intensity of combat—with several fire-fights a day in the summer—and the hostility of the civilian population, whom American soldiers viewed as culturally impenetrable, ungrateful for their civilizing mission, and readily plotting with insurgents. As a soldier puts it in *Korengal*, “Every single day they're trying to kill you when you're trying to bring something good into this shitty-ass valley they have.” Yet what most unsettled American troops about the Korengal were the forested mountains they were immersed in. From their fortified

outposts, they permanently saw the steep ridges that neutralized their technological superiority, undermined their mobility, and allowed their enemies to move and fire at them undetected. Noting that those mountains were not an inert, passive background to combat but objects with the power to negatively affect the most powerful military on Earth, Junger writes that this was “an axle-breaking, helicopter-crashing, spirit-killing, mind-bending terrain” (2010, p. 48). In *Restrepo*, a soldier admits that when he first saw the Korengal from the helicopter that brought him in, he felt so intimidated by the mere sight of the terrain that he gasped: “Holy shit! We aren't ready for this!”

The ways in which combat in the mountains around the Korengal affected Americans physically and emotionally have been captured not only by the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal* but also by several first-hand, deeply experiential accounts written by veterans and journalists who spent time in the valley (Christ, 2011; Darack, 2009; Hetherington, 2009; Junger, 2008, 2010; Shadix, 2015). The film *Lone Survivor* fictionalized one telling incident that took place next to the Korengal in 2005, when an elite US unit exhausted by its exertion through steep mountains was ambushed and wiped out by insurgents controlling the higher ground

E-mail address: [gordillo@mail.ubc.ca](mailto:gordillo@mail.ubc.ca).

(Luttrell, 2007). As part of the booming genre of first-hand accounts of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these films and books constitute what Woodward and Jenkins (2012) call “vectors of militarization”: that is, they naturalize the presence of US troops in the Korengal, celebrate their heroism, banalize the men fighting them as “bad guys” or “terrorists,” and minimize the suffering the US military inflicts on civilians. Yet despite the many silences created by their one-sided positionality, these accounts provide us with rich material to examine these wars, as noted by several scholars (Brown & Lutz, 2007; Woodward & Jenkins, 2012, 2016). The material on the Korengal, in particular, is particularly abundant and detailed for helping us discuss, first, how we can think more conceptually about terrain, the only spatial category that evokes that all spaces in this world have distinct forms, volumes, and textures. These accounts also allow us to examine something that has been known for millennia but is rarely dissected in its physical, affective, and geometrical intricacies: that terrain can be turned by rebellious populations into a powerful weapon against the state.

Categories such as space, place, territory, or landscape have long been theorized in depth and from a wide range of perspectives, and these concepts have been crucial in revealing the meaningful, historical, and contested dimensions of human spatiality (e.g. Casey, 1997; Elden, 2013a; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Mitchell, 1994). Theorizations of the concept of terrain, however, have been much thinner. Classic theorists of warfare such as Sun Tzu (1963) and von Clausewitz (2007) and military geographers and strategists have certainly long noted the importance of terrain in warfare. And the effects of terrain on mobility, visibility, fields of fire, and tactical awareness are topics regularly taught in military colleges (see O’Sullivan, 1991; Winters et al., 1998; US Army Marine Corps, 2007). But in military and physical geography, as Stuart Elden (2010) rightly notes, most references to “terrain” are descriptive and vague, without conceptual precision. At the most, terrain is briefly defined as comprising the “forms” of space.

Breaking with this descriptive tone, Elden has rescued terrain for political theory by arguing that we need to move past older paradigms in physical geography that define terrain as a rigid landform distinct from “land process,” for this distinction implies that “land processes work on terrain” and that “terrain itself is not seen as dynamic” (2017, p. 200–201). Because terrain is a process, Elden (2017) argues, it should not be reduced to land but also include the atmosphere, rivers, lakes, and the ocean, recuperating the original meaning of the Latin word *terra*, which alludes not just to the soil but to “the terrestrial” or that of the Earth. This processual and multilayered perspective is indeed crucial to account for the temporality of terrain, whose ambient textures change daily and with the seasons, as we shall see in the case of the Korengal. Yet what distinguishes Elden’s work on terrain is that he is drawn to this concept to examine the materiality of territorial power. Elden argues that territories, far from being “spaces” or flat surfaces, should be conceived of as political technologies—laws, map-making, policing—that are deployed for the control of terrain in its volumetric physicality (Elden, 2010, 2013a, 2013b), and in a process whereby terrain’s dynamism can disrupt these technologies (Elden, 2017). The theory of terrain I propose draws from Elden’s work but differs from it in one important regard: that I seek to conceptualize not only the materiality of territory but also the materiality of terrain itself. And this requires two conceptual moves: to explore the complex question of what terrain is and to acknowledge that this is not reducible to how terrain is socially appropriated or culturally perceived.

My conceptualization of terrain is in dialogue with the recent turn toward materiality in critical theory, which has demonstrated that objects are not inert matter passively yielding to human agency but, rather, that they have their own, often-uncontrollable

forms of existence, agency, and power (Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Bryant, 2011; Steinberg & Peters, 2015; Harman, 2016; Shaviro, 2014). The starting point of a theory of terrain is therefore that the latter has physical dimensions that exceed its contingent territorial, cultural, and sensorial appropriations by human actors. Yet my analysis departs from the objectivism of authors such as Brassier (2007) and Meillassoux (2008), who in insisting on the irreducibility of matter dismiss references to experience as idealist and anthropocentric. My argument, rather, is that the irreducibility of terrain can be best examined through the bodily experiences, affects, and agency of the human actors engaging it—a lens I call an affective geometry. This is *not* the Euclidian or Cartesian geometry of mathematized grids, coordinates, and straight lines abstracted from bodies and affects. This is the qualitative, non-linear geometry conceptualized by Spinoza (1982), attentive to how bodies affect and are affected by other bodies in a multiplicity of ways, which range from negative ways that may *diminish* the body’s capacity to act to positive ways that may *expand* the body’s powers for action.

In analyzing how bodies are affected by and affect terrain, an affective geometry can be seen as a materialist phenomenology that conceives of human bodies in their subjective interiority and dispositions and *also* as mobile, self-propelling bodies that in situations of combat—and as long as they remain able bodies—walk, run, climb rocks, duck on the ground, fall in ditches, shoot, feel exhausted hiking a mountain, and feel pain if hit by gunfire. The concept of “frictions of terrain” by James Scott (2009) captures the obstacles or *negative* pressures that terrain may put on human bodies, for instance by limiting or slowing down their mobility. Yet human actors have simultaneously drawn from terrain in myriad *positive* ways to enhance their actions. And whether bodies are affected negatively or positively by particular terrains depends not only on the latter but also on these bodies’ *disposition* to be affected in particular ways, and not in another—a disposition shaped by factors such as socialization, local knowledge, or overall fitness. An affective geometry, in short, allows us to decompose terrain into the multiple forms, socialized bodies, atmospheres, and contingent encounters that constitute it and, in doing so, to avoid a “terrain-determinism” that may downplay the salience of human agency in shaping how social actors are affected by their engagements with terrain.

An example of what an affective geometry of mountain warfare looks like will help clarify how I use this term. In October 2007, the US military launched Operation Rock Avalanche into “the enemy sanctuary” in the southern and eastern areas of the Korengal. The US military approached the mountainous terrain from above through their control of airspace by dropping troops off via Chinook helicopters. Drones and Apache helicopters circled overhead, providing eyes and support from the sky and affirming what Eyal Weizman (2007) called “the politics of verticality,” or the territorial importance of controlling the volumetric nature of terrain (see Elden 2013b). But this verticality involved not just the air but also the textured volume of the mountains. Once on the ground, the US soldiers began hiking steep terrain they had never seen in search for their elusive enemy. They all carried up to 40 kilos of armor, gear, weaponry, ammunition, radios, and water, which made their upward march slow, exhausting, and disorienting. The images of this climb in *Restrepo* show tired and anxious Americans slowly marching in the forest knowing they were being followed by men that they could not see.

One of the platoons eventually set up defensive positions on the edge of a deep cliff. The officers assumed that the verticality of the cliff made it “impassable terrain” and therefore “didn’t incorporate it into their defensive positions” (Junger, 2010, p. 111; see Shadix, 2015, p. 154). Note the geometrical calculation and subjective

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7492650>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7492650>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)