The Territories of the Self

I. Preserves

At the center of social organization is the concept of claims, and around this center, properly, the student must consider the vicissitudes of maintaining them.

To speak closely of these matters, a set of related terms is needed. There is the "good," the desired object or state that is in question; the "claim," namely, entitlement to possess, control, use, or dispose of the good; the "claimant," that is, the party on whose behalf the claim is made; the "impediment," meaning here the act, substance, means, or agency through which the claim is threatened; the "author" (or "counter-claimant"), namely, the party—when there is one—on whose behalf the threat to claims is intended; and finally, the "agents," these being the individuals who act for and represent the claimant and counter-claimant in these matters involving claims.

When we restrict our attention to activity that can only occur during face-to-face interaction, the claimant tends to be an individual (or a small set of individuals) and to function as his own agent. The same can be said of the counter-claimant, but in addition the impediment that occurs in his name is likely to involve his own activity or body. Therefore, conventional terms such as "victim" and "offender" will often be adequate. And one type of claim becomes crucial: it is a claim exerted in regard to "territory." This concept from ethology seems apt, because the claim is not so much to a discrete and particular matter but rather to a field of things—to a preserve—and because the boundaries of the field are ordinarily patrolled and defended by the claimant.

Territories vary in terms of their organization. Some are "fixed"; they are staked out geographically and attached to one claimant, his claim being supported often by the law and its courts. Fields, yards, and houses are examples. Some are "situational"; they are part of the fixed equipment in the setting (whether publicly or privately owned), but are made available to the populace in the form of claimed goods while-in-use. Temporary tenancy is perceived to be involved, measured in seconds, minutes, or hours, informally exerted, raising constant questions as to when the claim begins and when it terminates. Park benches and restaurant tables are examples. Finally, there are "ego-centric" preserves which move around with the claimant, he being in the center. They are typically (but not necessarily) claimed long term. Purses are an example. This threefold division is, of course, only valid in degree. A hotel room is a situational claim, yet it can function much like a house, a fixed territory. And, of course, houses in the form of trailers can move around.

The prototypical preserve is no doubt spatial and perhaps even fixed. However, to facilitate the study of co-mingling—at least in American society—it is useful to extend the notion of territoriality into claims that function like territories but are not spatial, and it is useful to focus on situational and ego-centric territoriality. Starting, then, with the spatial, we shall move by steps to matters that are not.

1. Personal Space: The space surrounding an individual, anywhere within which an entering other causes the individual to feel encroached upon, leading him to show displeasure and sometimes
to withdraw. A contour, not a sphere, is involved, the spatial demands directly in front of the face being larger than at back. The fixed layout of seats and other interior equipment may restrictively structure available space around the individual in one dimension, as occurs in line or column organization. When two individuals are alone in a setting, then concern about personal space takes the form of concern over straight-line distance.

Given that individuals can be relied upon to keep away from situations in which they might be contaminated by another or contaminate him, it follows that they can be controlled by him if he is willing to use himself calculatedly to constitute the object that the others will attempt to avoid, and in avoiding, move in a direction desired by him. For example, we read of the engaging action of a pickpocket "stall" who uses his body to "pratt in" a mark, that is to cause the mark to hold himself away from a body that is pressing on him, and incidentally hold himself in a position from which his wallet can be reached; similarly we read of the "prattin out"


2 This is nicely illustrated in Eastern seaboard parlor cars designed with a wide, longitudinal aisle and single seats at intervals on either side, the seats arranged to swivel. When there is crowding, travelers maximize their "comfort" by turning their seats to exactly that direction that will allow the eyes, when oriented in the direction of the trunk, to gaze upon the least amount of passenger flesh. Standing passengers may crowd right up against the seats but in doing so will find themselves ringed in by two rows of backs. In ordinary railway or bus seating in America, passengers who feel overcrowded may be able to send their eyes out the window, thereby vicariously extending their personal space.

3 This argument derives from H. Hediger's well-known discussion of "flight distance" and "escape distance" and its bearing on lion taming. See his Studies of the Psychology and Behaviour of Captive Animals in Zoos and Circuses, op. cit., pp. 40, 123.

of one bystander whose position prevents theft from another. It is a central feature of personal space that legitimate claim to it varies greatly according to the accountings available in the setting and that the bases for these will change continuously. Such factors as local population density, purpose of the approacher, fixed seating equipment, character of the social occasion, and so forth, can all influence radically from moment to moment what it is that is seen as an offense. Indeed, in human studies it is often best to consider personal space not as a permanently possessed, egocentric claim but as a temporary, situational preserve into which center the individual moves.

Take, for example, the social organization of co-waiting. Obviously, to stand or sit next to a stranger when the setting is all but empty is more of an intrusion than the same act would be when the place is packed and all can see that only this niche remains. In theory we might expect also a continuous process of adjustment whereby each arrival and each departure causes alterations throughout. What seems to occur in middle-class society is that arrival creates sequential reallocation but departure leads to somewhat more complex behavior, since an individual who leaves his current niche to take up a freed one produces an open sign that he is disinclined to be as close to his neighbor as he was. (When the two are of opposite sex, there exists the added complication that failure to move away when possible can be taken as a sign of undue interest.) In consequence, a departure may leave an empty place and no change in the remaining allocation, or at least an appropriator may wait for some tactful moment before making use of the newly available resource. In brief, moving in on someone or having oneself moved in on is a less delicate task than removing oneself from proximity to him. In consequence, as say a streetcar empties, there will be a period when two individuals signal by


proximity a relationship that does not in fact exist.

All of this may be seen in miniature in elevator behavior. Passengers have two problems: to allocate the space equably, and to maintain a defensible position, which in this context means orientation to the door and center with the back up against the wall if possible. The first few individuals can enter without anyone present having to rearrange himself, but very shortly each new entrant—up to a certain number—causes all those present to shift position and reorient themselves in sequence. Leave-taking introduces a tendency to reverse the cycle, but this is tempered by the countervailing resistance to appearing uncomfortable in an established distance from another. Thus, as the car empties, passengers acquire a measure of uneasiness, caught between two opposing inclinations—to obtain maximum distance from others and to inhibit avoidance behavior that might give offense.

2. The Stall: The well-bounded space to which individuals can lay temporary claim, possession being on an all-or-none basis. A scarce good will often be involved, such as a comfortable chair, a table with a view, an empty cot, a telephone booth. In the main, stalls are fixed in the setting, although, for example, at beaches devices such as large towels and mat can be carried along with the claimant and unrolled when convenient, thus providing a portable stall. When seats are built in rows and divided by common armrests (as in theaters), then personal space and stall have the same boundaries. When there is space between seats, then personal space is likely to extend beyond the stall. And, of course, there are stalls such as boxes at the opera which allocate several seats to the exclusive use (on any one social occasion) of a single “party.” The availability of stalls in a setting articulates and stabilizes claims to space, sometimes providing more than would have been claimed as personal space, sometimes less—as can be seen, for example, in regard to seats when a class of six-year-olds attends an adult theater or when parents have a meeting in an elementary school room.

It should be noted that a stall can be left temporarily while the leave-taker is sustained in a continuing claim upon it; personal space cannot. Furthermore, often the claimant to a stall will not be an individual but two or more of them who properly share it, as illustrated nicely in public tennis courts and commercial bowling alleys, these being designed to provide a large, well-equipped stall to parties of players for stipulated periods of time. (In our society the most common multi-person stall is the table, there being relatively few too small for more than one person or too large to be claimed by a party of only two.) Personal space, on the other hand, is largely a one-person possession, although in crowded places, such as packed elevators, a small child grasped to a parent

8 There are other general features of body behavior in elevators. In a useful unpublished paper (“Behavior in Elevators,” 1963), John Gueldner suggests that the general practice is for male riders to be somewhat at attention, with hands to the side and no side involvement, with an equivalent posture for women—as if all activity had halted while individuals were in transit. Gueldner suggests that the seeking of a defensible niche establishes standard priorities: first entrant takes up the corner near the controls or one of the rear corners; the next entrant is likely to take up the corner diagonally across from the taken one. The third and fourth passengers take up the remaining corners, the fifth the middle of the rear wall, the sixth the center of the car. Members of both sexes, however, tend to stay together, retaining an ecological expression of their status even though eyes are front. Gueldner also suggests that there is a point of crowding when effort to maintain space is rather suddenly given up and something approaching indiscriminate packing occurs.

7 The term has been used by ethnologists who study the daily round of the domestic cow. Note, stalls are to the underlife of bounded regions what personal, fixed territories are to the underlife of local communities. Thus public telephone booths in hotels like the New York Star-Liner-Hilton are sometimes used by ambulatory schizophrenics as places to sit, rest the burden of their all-purpose shopping bag, and have a nice long hallucinatory talk at the world through the open booth door.

8 In gentlemen’s clubs, mental hospitals, old folks’ homes, and domestic living rooms, proprietary claims tend to grow up around chairs and other stalls so that although these start out as part of situationally provided territories available on a first-come basis for any continuous period of use, they soon take on the character of fixed territories possessed by one individual whether or not he is present to claim by use. See Michael A. Woodbury, “Ward Dynamics and the Formation of a Therapeutic Group,” Chestnut Lodge Symposium, Rockville, Maryland, mimeo (1958), and Alan Lipman, “Chairs as Territory,” New Society, XX (April 1967): 564-566. Reading carrels in university libraries suffer the same transitional status.
may be treated as part of the latter’s personal space, and couples engaged in affectional entwining may also be treated as claiming a single personal space.

The point about stalls, as suggested, is that they provide external, easily visible, defendable boundaries for a spatial claim. Stalls provide a contrast in this regard to personal space, the latter having ever-shifting dimensions. This points up a problem in the organization of American public places. Here, for practical considerations, equipment such as picnic tables or park benches is often built to a size to suggest that each can be claimed as a stall by a participation unit, a “single” or a “with.” However, when crowding is such that this allocation would leave some individuals standing, then a rule is understood to apply that gives unaccommodated participation units the right to enforce a fictional division of a stall into two (and occasionally more than two) stalls. Obviously, then, as crowding increases, those already ensconced will begin to have to give up exclusive claim to a stall. An ambiguity results, because there is no well-established principle to order the sequence in which various claimants, already ensconced, will be obliged to give up their exclusiveness. A field is thus opened for personal enterprise. Hence, on buses, streetcars, and trains, seats designed to hold two persons, and fully recognized to be designed to accommodate two strangers when necessary, nonetheless establish for the first arrival a territory he may attempt to retain for himself by standard rules: he may leave his own possessions on the empty place, thereby marking it for his own and obliging competitors to move (or ask to have moved) something that symbolizes another; he may deny his eyes to those seeking a seat, thereby preventing them from obtaining the fleeting permission that they tend to seek, failure to receive which can cause them to move on to the next available place; he may expose some contaminating part of himself, such as his feet, or allow part of his body to fall on the disputed place, so that those who would use the place must invite contamination, and so forth.

3. Use Space: The territory immediately around or in front of an individual, his claim to which is respected because of apparent instrumental needs. For example, a gallery goer can expect that when he is close to a picture, other patrons will make some effort to walk around his line of vision or excuse or minimize their momentary blocking it. Persons holding a conversation over a distance can expect a similar accommodation from non-participants whose bodies might block the giving and receiving of conversation management cues. Sportsmen of all kind expect some consideration will be given to the amount of elbow room they require in order to manipulate their equipment, as do convicts using pickaxes to break stone. Gymnasts using a vaulting horse expect that others will “stay out of their way.” A crewman obliged to scrub and polish a designated portion of the surface of his warship expects, especially on the day before weekly inspection, to be able to keep everyone away during and right after the cleaning. 9 Note that circumstances can allow the individual to offer instrumental grounds for demanding limits on the level of noise and sound, especially when the source is physically close by.

4. The Turn: The order in which a claimant receives a good of some kind relative to other claimants in the situation. A decision rule is involved, ordering participants categorically (“women and children first,” or “whites before blacks”), or individually (“smallest first, then next smallest”), or some mixture of both. 10 Typically

8 See Philip D. Roos, “Jurisdiction: An Ecological Concept,” Human Relations, XXI (1968): 75–84. Roos provides a case history argument for making a sharper distinction than I have done between territoriality, involving exclusion and possession, and “jurisdiction,” involving only exclusion.

9 Upon fuller consideration, we are likely to find that the means employed to manage the allocation of a minor good (such as a turn) involve more than one rule. And rules about rules may develop to cover standard problems, determining what should be done when no rule seems to apply, or when one that should apply cannot, or when mutually incompatible rules apply. One rule may be defined as overruling another on all occasions when they both apply, or each may be accorded a sphere where it overrides the other. One rule may serve to rank categories of persons and another to rank members within a category thusly ranked. Note, individuals often identify a social order by a well-known rule that figures in it, but the viability of this rule is often dependent on a complex of associated rules

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claimants are required to have been present in order to establish their claim on a turn, but once this has been done and marked in some way, they may be allowed to absent themselves until their turn comes up. In our Western society, perhaps the most important principle in turn organization is “first come, first served,” establishing the claim of an individual to come right after the person “ahead” and right before the person “behind.” This decision rule creates a dominance ranking but a paradoxical one, since all other forms of preference are thereby excluded.

Turn-taking requires not only an ordering rule but a claiming mechanism as well. This may be formal, for example, number-tickets, names on a receptionist’s list, or informal, as when the individual remains close to the place of service and assumes that a tacit covering the natural range of contingencies. The longer and the more widely a given rule is in force, the more developed, presumably, is the complex of rules that buttresses it.

In many cases, a claimant is allowed at will to let the party behind go ahead of him; he may even be allowed to pick any place lower down in the line, presumably on the assumption that those behind his original place and above the place he picks will have gained a turn and those below this point will have lost nothing. And in all cases, the claimant apparently can give up his turn entirely. In brief, turn as here defined is a right but not a duty. This raises the issue of “negative queues,” namely, an ordering of persons who are to receive something they do not want, such as a place in a gas chamber. (Similarly, some prisons have seats that cannot be given up for a lady.) A dialectical way of assimilating such organization to the notion of preserves is to describe the good that is involved as a claim to postponement. Naturally, here one would be allowed to take any turn ahead of one’s position but disallowed from stepping behind or giving up entirely one’s position.

It might be said—with apologies to Simmel—that it is the essential character of everyday turn-taking to be a middle ground, the claims of property and contract being held in check at one end, the claims of social rank at the other. To take one’s turn is neither to take one’s property nor to take one’s social place. Utilitarian goals are involved, but typically ones so minor that it would have been easy to put their allocation into the service of ceremonial expression. Whereas ceremonial expression provides bodily expression of social position when things go right, turns in daily life do so only when things go wrong.

The Territories of the Self consensus will operate. Sometimes a line or row formation (a queue) will be employed as a collective, mnemonic device, and sometimes this formal device allows the participant to sustain a formally unmarked turn during brief absences. Many queues qualify with as a claimant, especially where one member can transact all of its business (as in movie queues), and this often leads to permission to join an acquaintance ahead of where one otherwise would have been, since in these cases a single already established in line will be able to act as though he is merely the agent

18 A useful paper on turn-taking in one type of extremity is Leon Mann, “Queue Culture: The Waiting Line as a Social System,” American Journal of Sociology, LXX (November 1969): 340-354. Some turn-taking merely involves a decision between two users as to which will use a road or walk first, but in most cases, it appears clear that a service of some kind is the good that must be allocated. Service systems are one of the fundamental organizational devices of public order, and their close study has hardly begun. The complete paradigm involves at least five roles: supervisor, service, service next-up, member of the line. There are, of course, automated systems without supervisors and servers, and many systems which frequently have neither next-up nor member of the line. A service system is the collective form of which the individual’s part is the service stop, this involving one complete cycle whereby a participation unit (a with or a single) moves off from some base of operation, seeks out and obtains some service, and then returns to the base.

It might be added that many services are provided in such a manner that an encounter, a ritually ratified face-to-face contact, occurs only if something out of the ordinary happens and must be managed, providing us with a clear case where server and served can be in contact but not in conversational touch. (Indeed, the server need not even look at the served, but only at, say, the article chosen for purchase, the customer’s money, and perhaps his hand.) This sort of demilitarization of transactions is sometimes cited as a mark of incivility and urban impersonality, an allegation that is half true and half nonsense. A great deal of consensus and mutual understanding is required to support service transactions executed without the help of social ritual. In some shops a year or so of patronage is required before patron and server know each knows that talk and eye contact can be dispensed with and actions allowed to do all the speaking. (Of course in other service settings, such as better-cashier dealings at race tracks, newcomers quickly learn to sustain “blind” transactions.) On the prevalence of demilitarized service transactions, I am indebted to a useful paper by Marilyn Merritt, “On the Service Encounter,” unpublished (1968).
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for a while that is just now fully arrived. I want only to add that when turns are held by bodies standing in single file, then each participant will be involved both in maintaining his turn and his personal space. However, since the taking of turns provides a clear reading of events, great reductions of personal space can be tolerated along with attendant bodily contact.

5. The Sheath: The skin that covers the body and, at a little remove, the clothes that cover the skin. Certainly the body's sheath can function as the least of all possible personal spaces, the minimal configuration in that regard; but it can also function as a preserve in its own right, the purest kind of egocentric territoriality. Of course, different parts of the body are accorded different concern —indeed this differential concern tells us in part how the body will be divided up into segments conceptually. Among the American middle classes, for example, little effort is made to keep the elbow inviolate, whereas orifice areas are of concern. And, of course, across different cultures, the body will be differently segmented ritually.

6. Possessional Territory: Any set of objects that can be identified with the self and arrayed around the body wherever it is. The central examples are spoken of as "personal effects" —easily detachable possessions such as jackets, hats, gloves, cigarette packs, matches, handbags and whatever they contain, and parcels.14 We must also include a claimant's co-present dependents because, territorially, they function somewhat like his personal possessions. Finally, there are objects that remain tethered to a particular setting but can be temporarily claimed by persons present, much as can stalls: ashtrays, magazines, cushions, and eating utensils are examples. One might also include here regulative command over mechanical creature-comfort devices: control over radio, television sets, temperature, windows, light, and so forth.

7. Information Preserve: The set of facts about himself to which

an individual expects to control access while in the presence of others.15 There are several varieties of information preserve, and there is some question about classing them all together. There is the content of the claimant's mind, control over which is threatened when queries are made that he sees as intrusive, nosy, untactful. There are the contents of pockets, purses, containers, letters, and the like, which the claimant can feel others have no right to ascertain. There are biographical facts about the individual over the divulgence of which he expects to maintain control. And most important for our purposes, there is what can be directly perceived about an individual, his body's sheath and his current behavior, the issue here being his right not to be stared at or examined.16 Of course, since the individual is also a vehicular unit and since pilots of other such units have a need and a right to track him, he will come to be able to make an exquisite perceptual distinction between being looked at and being stared at, and, God


15 No doubt there is a link here between having the body touched and having it seen, as in the biblical sense of "knowing" someone or the legal sense of having carnal knowledge. This is not the only ambiguity. Name, both Christian and family, can function like a bit of discretionary information whose divulgence one would like to be able to control but cannot always do so. Here see, for example, A. C. Reich, "Police Questioning of Law-Abiding Citizens," Yale Law Journal, LXV, no. 7 (1956). Name can also function as a self-identified personal possession whose use by others the individual may be prepared to license providing they stand in the right relationship to him. In this regard, note the situation of the English better classes at the turn of the century as described by Harold Nicolson, Good Behaviour (London: Constable and Company, 1935), p. 272:

In my own youth, I had been addressed by my Christian name at my private or even my public school, and I should have blushed scarlet, feeling that my privacy had been outraged and that some secret malignity had been purloined from me, as if I had been an Andaman Islander or a Maori.

In general, there is the fact that concern for preserves such as the spatial can be partly based indirectly on a concern for information preserves, the former supporting the latter.
help us, learn to suspect, if not detect, that the latter is being masked by the former; and he will learn to conduct himself so that others come to respond to him in the same way. Incidentally, wherever we find such fine behavioral discriminations, we should suspect that what is at work is the need to keep two different behavioral systems functioning without interference in the same physical area.

8. Conversational Preserve: The right of an individual to exert some control over who can summon him into talk and when he can be summoned, and the right of a set of individuals once engaged in talk to have their circle protected from entrance and overhearing by others.

I have touched on eight territaries of the self, all of a situational or an egocentric kind: personal space, stalls, use space, turns, sheath, possessional territory, information preserve, and conversational preserve. One general feature of these several forms of territoriality should be noted: their socially determined variability. Given a particular setting and what is available in it, the extensivity of preserves obviously can vary greatly according to power and rank. Patients in a charity hospital may have to wait until dying before being given a privacy screen around their bed; in middle-class private hospitals, the patient may enjoy this privilege at other times, too, for example, when breast feeding a child.17 Similarly, clinic patients in a hospital may be discussed by physicians by name, while private patients in the same hospital are given the privacy rights of being referred to by room number.18 In general, the higher the rank, the greater the size of all territaries of the self and the greater the control across the boundaries. (Within a given household, for example, adults tend to have vastly larger territorial claims than do children.) Cutting across these differences, however, there is another—the variation that occurs in the understandings sustained by any one set of individuals as they move from situation to situation. For example, middle-class Americans at Western ski lodges allow their bodies to be stared at and touched-in-passing to a degree that would be considered quite intrusive were this to occur in the public places of their home town.19 Finally, there are group-cultural differences that crosscut these cross cuttings. For example, there is some evidence that lower-class blacks are more concerned to obtain eaving avoidance than are lower-class Italians.20

II Markers

The claim to a preserve by a putative possessor is made visible by a sign of some kind, which, following ethological practice, may be called a “marker.”21

Markers are of various kinds. There are “central markers,” being objects that announce a territorial claim, the territory radiating outward from it, as when sunglasses and lotion claim a beach chair, or a purse a seat in an airliner, or a drink on the bar the

19 Similarly ski lodges tend to allow more license with respect to the initiation of encounters among the unacquainted than is the case in business settings. Here I am indebted to an unpublished paper, “Ski Resort Behavior Patterns” (1966), by Beatrice Farrar.