

## Chapter 23: **Space and Place**

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The question of space and place in geographical knowledge is ultimately not just about whether the question of “where” matters in the way that “when” does in explaining “how” and even “why” something happens. It is also about *how* it matters. Given that both space and place are about the “where” of things and their relative invocation has usually signaled different understandings of what “where” means, it is best to examine them together rather than separately. That is the purpose of this chapter.

Contrary perhaps to first appearance, space and place are fairly complex words. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives over about two pages to space and around three and a half pages to place. Space is regarded largely as a dimension within which matter is located or a grid within which substantive items are contained. Along with its geographic meaning as “a portion of space in which people dwell together” and “locality,” place is also a “rank” in a list (as “in the first place”), a temporal ordering (as in something “took place”), and a “position” in a social order (as in “knowing your place”). Notwithstanding this variety, over the greatest span of time it has been the geographic meanings of the term place that have been most important, at least in philosophical circles. Both Plato and Aristotle, to name but two foundational thinkers, had recourse to concepts analogous to the modern English geographic place as, respectively, *chôra* and *topos*. The modern term space descends from the second of these, even though the term itself dates from the seventeenth century. From this viewpoint, as the Italian geographer Franco Farinelli

(2003, 11) says, two meanings of place can be clearly distinguished among the ancient Greeks:

Place ... is a part of the terrestrial surface that is not equivalent to any other, that cannot be exchanged with any other without everything changing. Instead with space [place as location] each part can be substituted for another without anything being altered, precisely how when two things that have the same weight are moved from one side of a scale to another without compromising the balance.

In the second case place is assimilated to space (it is location) whereas in the first place is distinguished from space as having its own special qualities. Much of the open academic debate about “space and place” dates from the nineteenth century rather than from the ancients, although other terms (such as location and region) have often figured more prominently in discussion than the terms space and place themselves. The term “space” as we use it today only came into use in the seventeenth century. Space and place are now fundamental geographic concepts, to the extent that geography has even been defined as a “science of places” by the famous French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache or as a “spatial science” by an array of writers. The various meanings of the terms can be used to trace the intellectual trends of the field, particularly disputes between that abstract spatial analysis which tends to view places as nodes in space simply reflective of the spatial imprint of universal physical, social or economic processes and that concrete environmental analysis which conceives of places as milieux that exercise a mediating role on physical, social and economic processes and thus affect how such processes operate. The first is a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space and the second is a phenomenological understanding of a place as a distinctive coming together in space. From this viewpoint, if place in the former sense is definable entirely in relation to a singular spatial metric (latitude and longitude, elevation, etc.) or other

spatial grid defined by putatively non-spatial processes (core-periphery, city-hinterland, administrative regions, etc.), place in the second sense is constituted by the impact that being somewhere has on the constitution of the processes in question.

Good examples of the two understandings at work come from Mediterranean studies. If the classic work of Fernand Braudel (1949) tends to view the Mediterranean over the long term as a grand space or spatial crossroads in exchange, trade, diffusion and connectivity between a set of grand source areas to the south, north and east, the recent revisionist account of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (2000) views the Mediterranean region as a congeries of micro-ecologies or places separated by distinctive agricultural and social practices in which connectivity and mobility within the region is more a response to the management of environmental and social risks than the simple outcome of extra-regional initiatives. Thus, Braudel tends to have a geometric or locational view of the geography of the Mediterranean whereas Horden and Purcell have a more holistic, topographic and phenomenological one of the places out of which the Mediterranean world as a whole is constituted.

The conflict between these two dominant meanings, space versus place, is longstanding. Indeed, the vicissitudes of argument in geography over such definitional issues as regions, spatial analysis, and human-environment relations involve competing conceptions of space and place as much as distinctive views about the nature of science or the relative virtues of quantitative methods. Outside of geography, little critical attention has been given to either definition, yet, of course, implicitly one has been adopted. By definition, everything happens somewhere. Typically, the definition adopted has been the view of place as a location on a surface where things “just happen” rather

than the more holistic view of places as the geographical context for the mediation of physical, social and economic processes. This probably results from the modernist tendency to exalt abstract categories and terms (such as class, ethnicity, interests, identities, etc.) and then generalize about them across time and space rather than focus directly on either the concrete activities to which they supposedly refer or the co-variation rather than singular occurrence of what the categories and terms represent from place to place. A classic example is the academic victory of proximate-cause epidemiology (individual “risk factors,” etc.) over life-course and communal epidemiology which emphasize everyday life experience in explaining disease morbidity and mortality. Life course hazards, many intimately associated with where and with whom we live, are in fact better predictors of human longevity than are so-called individual level health-adverse behaviors and cardiovascular risk factors (e.g. Diez Roux et al. 2001). Parents, kin, access to junk food, and neighborhood hazards can be more deadly than simply the configuration of your genes or individual “risky” behavior. Universalizers, from aficionados of the “selfish gene” to those of “homo economicus,” have always had trouble with both space and place. Their stories are truly spaceless and placeless except *coincidentally*.

A review essay such as this necessarily must be selective. After first providing a review of the modern origins and history of the two dominant geographic meanings of the term “place” and then discussing the devaluation of its second meaning down the years, I turn to some recent theoretical attempts at trying to transcend the two dominant meanings and end with recounting some of the main recent arguments within geography about place as an empirically useful concept. It is important to note a couple of caveats. First,

sometimes the two terms, space and place, are not clearly distinguished from one another analytically or their meaning is reversed (as in de Certeau 1984). Second, empirical stories based loosely on the effects of places (in the plural) on, say politics, intellectual history, or economic growth, need not always involve sophisticated theorizing about place (in the singular). Indeed, in the end it is the concrete effects of places that matter more than remaining at the abstract level of conceptualizing place. From this perspective “place” (on the second meaning) is a meta-concept that allows for the particular stories associated with specific places. That said, implicit in the meanings ascribed to space and place are various routes to thinking how geography matters to a wide range of both natural and human phenomena (Sack 1980).

The main current challenge to both of the dominant meanings comes from the idea that the world itself is increasingly “placeless” as space-spanning connections and flows of information, things, and people undermine the rootedness of a wide range of processes anywhere in particular. Space is conquering place (e.g. Friedman 2005). From this perspective, new technologies -- the container, the Internet, the cell phone -- are making places obsolete (but see for a robust empirical counterview Goldenberg and Levy 2009). Yet, previous rounds in the diffusion of technological innovation, even though often touted as likely to do much the same thing (roads, railways, telegraphy, ship canals, etc.), had no such effect. What they did do was help reconstitute and reorganize spatial relations such that places were remade and reconfigured (Pacelli and Marchetti 2007). Distance did not die, its forms and effects were reformulated. What seems to lie behind so much of this intellectual diminution of the role of place, if not now then immanently, is the image of an isolated, traditional and passive “place” increasingly transcended in the

march of history (from feudalism to capitalism, etc. or some other linear or stage conception of history) by the increasing power of mobility. Such ideas die hard in a Western thought more committed to very general ideas about how the world works than to an accounting of its concrete geographical realities. The first view of place (as a node in space) is itself a doubtful particularism emerging from a reading of the history of northwest Europe as a progressive overcoming of local places by national spaces (and now by global space) rather than a self-evident and “natural” universal coming about everywhere as a transcendental becoming. Consequently, Geography as a field of study has suffered from the marginalization of what it can study beyond a narrow recounting of locations and their names.

### **Senses of Space and Place**

In the simplest sense place refers to either a location somewhere or to the occupation of that location. The first sense is of having an address and the second is about living at that address. Sometimes this distinction is pushed further to separate the physical place from the phenomenal space in which the place is located. Thus place becomes a particular or lived space. Location then refers to the fact that places must be located somewhere. Place is specific and location (or space) is general.

These definitions are largely uncontroversial. The basic formulation, however, has been subject to two very important points of contention down the years. The first is that the language of location (or space) and place is often elided with the language of geographical scale. Scale has been a major concern of many geographers since the 1990s, often without much explicit linkage to disputes about space versus place. Implicitly, however, the language of space is privileged in much of this writing (e.g.

Brenner 2004; Keil and Mahon 2009). Though there is no necessary connection of this type, the usage is very common with place standing in for the local (and traditional) and location/space representing the global (and the modern) (Jessop et al. 2008). This conflation draws attention to a further feature of how the two terms are frequently used. Place is often associated with the world of the past and location/space with the world of the present and future. From one perspective, place is therefore nostalgic, regressive or even reactionary, and space is progressive and radical. Jeff Malpas (2006, 17-27) traces some of the unease with revival of a stronger sense of place than mere location to the fact that the philosopher Martin Heidegger was a major apologist for an ontologically strong concept of place and because of his political views, he was closely associated for a time with the German Nazi regime in the mid-1930s, place has acquired a similarly reprobate reputation, particularly among some geographical scholars on the self-defined political left, such as Richard Peet and Neil Smith, and who are perhaps unfamiliar with Heidegger's actual writings about place and perhaps ascribe too much significance to them for all understandings of place.

From another viewpoint, however, place is being lost to an increasingly homogeneous and alienating sameness. "Placelessness" is conquering place as modernity displaces traditional folkways (Relph 1976). Strip malls and chain stores replace the elemental variety that once characterized the landscape. Everywhere is increasingly alike as we all spend more of our time in non-places such as airport lounges, shopping malls and on the Internet, living lives increasingly without any sense of place whatsoever. Totalistic attachment to idealized traditional places has been re-placed by life in nowhere land (Augé 1995). Indeed, to some space has dissolved into networks that are placeless in

any substantive, even perhaps locational, sense of the term (Marston et al. 2005). From both perspectives – space as scale and place as past -- usage reflects a subtle incorporation of time into how the terms are defined. Place is the setting for social rootedness and landscape continuity. Location/space represents the transcending of the past by overcoming the rootedness of social relations and landscape in place through mobility and the increased similarity of everyday life from place to place.

Secondly, the priority given to either location/space or place depends broadly on what is made of the nature of space in relation to place. In particular, what is made of the distinction rests in large part on whether Newton's or Leibniz's understanding of space prevails (Casati and Varzi 1999, 21). Discussion of location/space, as opposed to place, is a modern concern. Indeed, it could be seen as one of the markers of modernity, dating at most from seventeenth century Europe, and associated with such intellectual giants as Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, and Kant. From this point of view, argued persuasively by Edward Casey (1993, 8), place became subordinated to space (and both to time) in the seventeenth century and has only become tentatively rehabilitated in the twentieth. The project of a "spatial history" that can be associated with Heidegger and Foucault depends fundamentally on relating place to space as if they are internally related to one another (Elden 2001, 90-91). Much contemporary understanding of space and place, however, seems to depend on relatively unreformed and competing seventeenth century conceptions of what they mean, specifically Newtonian and Leibnizian ones.

In the Newtonian view, space is absolute, in the sense that it is an entity in itself, independent of whatever objects and events occupy it, containing these objects and events, and having separate powers from them. Newton's view is best used to describe



the motion of rigid bodies through “empty” space. Newton was a “transitional” figure in the genesis of modernity, so it is not surprising that he would endorse a medieval or thing-like conception of space. In other words, he conceived of absolute space as previous generations of thinkers had always thought of particular places without recourse to modern ideas of space at all: as concrete and real (Disalle 2002). In the Leibnizian view, space is relational, in the sense that it has no powers independent of objects and events but can be construed only from the relations between them. In other words, Leibniz is the founder of the modernist view of space that gives it no powers in itself. Only within a Newtonian view can space be “active” in itself because of the forces, like gravitational and magnetic attraction, that operate through it. Space is only active, therefore, because it is made up of places where things are located within a force-field at any particular moment (Feingold 2004). In a Leibnizian view it is the powers of events and objects taking place that make space appear “active”. But space is entirely parasitic on the relations between objects and events occupying places. Space thus exists because of relations between sites at which events and objects are located (Antognazza 2008). In both cases, of course, neither space nor place can exist without the other. But the priorities obviously differ. As a result, subjectivists, emphasizing the subjective orientation of human actors in places that condition them, are usually Newtonian in their understanding of space and emphasize place, whereas objectivists, emphasizing the role of causal “forces” in human life, tend to a Leibnizian position and refer to location and spatial relations. This association often seems to lead to the “other” concept receiving short shrift when anyone becomes committed primarily to one or the other, irrespective of whether the thinker is either a self-conscious Newtonian or Leibnizian. Various

“relational” and “phase shift” views of space have arisen that try to both transcend the gap between the two conceptions of space and to associate them with temporal changes in the content and/or disposition of space (Jones 2009). Operationalizing them empirically without slipping into favoring one conception of space over another has remained more difficult than has waxing rhapsodic about their abstract possibility (Keil and Mahon 2009).

To some up-and-coming British and American geographers in the 1950s and 1960s, the very term place (particularly in the form of the analogous concept of region) was associated with the *ancien regime* of geography, and space in itself was to be both the new object of study and the basis for a new and all-conquering intellectual tribe. Like an erstwhile Futurist, pickaxe and shovel to the ready, Peter Gould (1979), for example, wrote of cleaning out the Augean stables of Geography. Giving an explicit privilege to location/space over place, then, goes back at least to the “spatial revolution” in geography in the 1960s but it also been long apparent among those who for political reasons associate place negatively with the past and space positively with the future (e.g. on the one hand, Abler et al. 1971 and, on the other, Harvey 2000). Primary focus was placed on modeling interaction over space – migration flows, diffusion of innovation, spacing of settlements as a function of distance to market, land use specialization and industrial location in terms of transportation costs – more than, say, local/regional differences or place characteristics (see, e.g., Isard 1956; Haggett 1965; Berry 1967). Spatial analysis may have failed to capture the field in its entirety, as a philosophy of “spatial separatism” (Sack 1974) that intended to clear out all other theoretical frameworks, but it has had a long “shelf-life” in the practices of many geographers committed to mapping spatial

patterns and reasoning back to the social, economic, and/or political processes that putatively may have produced them. So-called Geographical Information Science has been largely invented with the advent of fast computers around the older conception of spatial analysis. The focus is still on relationships between events and objects in space by correlating their spatial co-occurrence. This overall approach was challenged in the 1970s by those who claimed that the nature of space and its effects depend on the economic conditions under which space is “produced” (Harvey 1973). What can be called a Zipfian view of space (after George Zipf (1949), the advocate of the idea of the “principle of least effort”), in which space was thought of as simply constraining human behavior as people attempted to limit their efforts and maximize the efficiency with which they “overcame” space, was confronted with a Marxist view, in which space was now “produced” by powerful economic forces that commodified land and thereby limited what any one person other than those who owned it could do with it. The focus was on the ways in which economic processes, particularly the establishment of ground rents and the search for profit, produce spatial patterns of investment and divestment. Uneven development within countries as well as globally, therefore, can be put down to the working out of “forces and relations of production” over space and time (Smith 1984). At its most sophisticated this approach can entail a historicist understanding of how the role of space changes as technologies, shifting conditions of production, and allied representations give rise to new patterns of capital accumulation and income distribution (Harvey 1989). With even more historical depth, if less dependent on exegesis from Marx, at a global scale “the development of underdevelopment” between rich and poor regions can be understood as the exploitation of poor people in some parts of the world

(the periphery) by (on average) richer people in core regions because of the way in which the global economy has developed since the sixteenth century (e.g. Wallerstein 1979).

From a totally different perspective, that of behavioralism, some critics of spatial analysis claimed that what was needed was a better understanding of how space is mapped (“mental maps”) and used by individuals without prior assumptions of distance-minimization and effort reduction (Wolpert 1964; Cox and Golledge 1969). This could even allow for cultural differences in spatial sensibilities and the use of space (Abler et al. 1971; Hägerstrand 1982; Bonnemaïson 2005).

Notwithstanding the theoretical differences between these various modes of thinking and that associated with “spatial overlays,” the privileging of place as simply location has continued. Places themselves are seen as simply incidental (if necessary) to more profound non-spatial processes such as class struggle, perceptual capacity and orientation, capital accumulation, or commodification. To give places any more significance than this is to risk a dangerous “spatial fetishism” that is off-limits in an abstract world of purely social, psychological, or economic determination.

The second sense involves a primary focus on the first-hand experience of human subjects in places (Sack 1980; Entrikin 1990). Space qua location is bracketed, or put to one side, because its “abstractness discourages experiential explorations” (Casey 2001, 683). In his philosophical rehabilitation of the second sense of place, Casey (1997, x) notes how “place has been assimilated to space. ... As a result, place came to be considered a mere ‘modification’ of space (in Locke’s revealing term) - a modification that aptly can be called ‘site,’ that is, leveled-down, monotonous space for building and other human enterprises” (author’s emphasis). Casey’s goal is to argue for the crucial

importance of place in much thinking about community and the public sphere, even though the connections are often not made explicit. He wants to make place different from site and space, even though he acknowledges Michel Foucault's point that the modern world is largely one of Leibnizian sites and relations (Casey 1997, 298-300). In rethinking space as place, his primary interest lies in phenomenologically linking places to selves. The central issue is that of "being in place differently" (Casey 1997, 337) conditioning the various dimensions of selfhood, from the bodily to the psychological, institutional, and architectural. So, though the "shape" of place has changed historically, it is now no mere container but, rather, a taking place, its rediscovery and naming as such is long overdue. Thus: "Despite the seduction of endless space (and the allure of serial time), place is beginning to escape from its entombment in the cultural and philosophical underworld of the modern West" (Casey 1997, 339).

In the 1970s and 1980s this conception of place underwent a significant revival in geography. Some of this new interest in a richer sense of place was due to a rejection of the positivist (law-finding) pretensions of spatial analysis (e.g. Gregory 1978) but more was due to the insight that the term place carries with it not only the meaning of spatial location but also those of social position and moral order (Tuan 1974). From this viewpoint, places give as well as acquire meaning in terms of what they offer socially and morally. More specifically, different locations are often associated with certain spirits or sacred purpose, organize space into patterns of ideological meaning (recall monuments and boundaries of all sorts), and define "fields of care" such as turfs and territories with which social groups identify and distinguish themselves from others (e.g. Tuan 1974; Markus 1994). More mundanely, however, as Aristotle was among the first to note,

people bring to life the idea that everything belongs somewhere in particular. Or, as Michael Curry (1998, 48) has made the point: “the relationship between an object and where it belongs is not simply fortuitous, or a matter of causal forces, but it is rather intrinsic or internal, a matter of what that thing actually is. When things are not where they belong, when they are out of place, they cannot truly be themselves.”

Although the impulse to see place in terms of meaning for human agents can be seen as a type of American Romanticism à la Thoreau (Massey and Thrift 2003, 286), this interpretation misses the fact that much of the revival of interest in place all over the world (including the United States) focuses on the mediating role of place in both social relations and the acquisition of meaning rather than on some transcendental idealization of place (e.g. Pred 1984; Massey 1984; Agnew 1989; Livingstone 2003). The ransacking of the works of French philosophers (Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Latour, etc.) by some British geographers to find a quotation of two to justify their re-animation of place would be just as simple-minded a representation of an equally wide range of writing. What is clear, however, is that place in the second, stronger, sense has made an important return to the agenda of contemporary geography.

### **Devaluing the Stronger Sense of Place**

Until recently, however, the second socially and morally inflected sense of place has not had much appeal beyond geography in particular and certainly not within modern social science in general. I have argued elsewhere (Agnew 1989; 1994) that this has had much to do with the normative association of fields such as political science and sociology with nation-state building and the adoption of a scientific imagination that has tended to ascribe much greater significance in modernity to the preferences and motivations of

individual persons (methodological individualism), social groups, or neurological syndromes than to the historical-geographical contexts from which individual and group motivations could be seen as deriving.

Particularly powerful has been the idea derived from late-nineteenth century social thought that, in social terms at least, place equates to a collectivist traditional community and that as modern national (and global) society has inevitably eclipsed community so has place lost its significance. This linear, evolutionary narrative is shared by all of the dominant perspectives in social science whether it goes under the rubric of from traditional to modern or from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. Why has this idea become second nature?

The first element in the argument is that human history has been seen in analogous terms to that of biological evolution in which an older social form, community, has been replaced by a newer one, society. In this understanding, idiosyncratic traditional communities would be replaced by the more efficient self-regulating modern society based upon ordering individual persons. Places would then naturally go the way of the morally distinctive communities that once mapped onto them. Secondly, the taken-for-granted nationalism that has long afflicted the practitioners of the emerging social sciences has meant that the nation-state has become regarded as not simply the main but the only geographic unit of account. Indeed, to the extent that “geography” now meant anything at all, it was an accounting of “facts” about this or that state with respect to resources, cultural characteristics, commercial possibilities, etc. Potential geographic entities other than state territories could have no role in a modern world in which the nation-state is the highest form of political and social organization. Territory, therefore,

in the sense of a spatial block of sovereign control and authority, has been the main way in which the various social sciences (sociology, political science, in particular) have tended to conceive of and privilege space over place (Hirst 2005; Delaney 2005).

Thirdly, to the extent that place has survived it is in backward parts of the world such as the so-called Third World. But once on the path to development these places would also fade in significance. The presumption here is that place is anachronistic and is re-placed by space as modernity comes to prevail (Agnew 2003). Fourthly, such ideas as community and society are in origin theoretical “ideal types” rather than empirical descriptions of actual spatio-social arrangements. Their originators were offering a particular vision of the general historical trajectory taken in Europe and, to a degree, elsewhere. But this more tentative understanding of what the concepts were supposed to do has been lost on subsequent exponents who have regarded them as totalistic labels for how things were versus how they are now. Finally, in radical social science place has been practically devalued because as capitalism reduces places to locations when it converts use-values into exchange-values, a concomitant commodification has detached people from their self-creations in place. In this perspective, a geographical alienation of people from the world around them has been the kiss of death for place.

A static view of place as naturally associated with traditional or pre-capitalist society has become enshrined in much modern social science. Living in place, from this point of view, is akin to stepping into a Thomas Kinkade painting and enjoying the unself-conscious sociability of a world long since lost. Today, as we all bowl alone and look back nostalgically on the world we have lost, place takes on a misty glow as a concept whose shelf life has long since run out. This putting place in the past has made it



next to impossible to argue the merits of place as a concept with any sort of theoretical equivalence to those such as class, status, nation, state, and firm. Only as location, and that of diminishing impact, has the term kept up much of any significance. Recently, however, and in response to the crises of both conventional and radical social thought in the face of such trends as globalization and the collapse of the established socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and elsewhere (a sort of dystopian modernity), some signs of interest in reviving the concept for what it might offer in new circumstances have appeared on the horizon. I turn first to some largely theoretical initiatives in geography that offer various ways of engaging the two meanings of place, bringing space and place together, so to speak, before exploring some more empirically attuned approaches that might make a more convincing case for the conceptual uses of place to a wider audience.

### **Putting Place into Space Theoretically**

Much recent effort in geography has gone into trying to theoretically overcome the historic gap between the two senses of place. As we have seen, each of the two meanings tends to assimilate place to one or the other end of a continuum running from nomothetic (generalized) location at one end to idiographic (particularistic) place at the other.

Attempts at putting space and place together must necessarily try to bring these meanings of geographic place together. In recent years there have been four theoretical ways in which this task has been approached: the neo-Marxist, the humanist or agency-based, the feminist, and the performative, listed in terms of their approximate relative popularity.

Each of these rejects the either/or logic in relation to space and place that has characterized most geographic and social thought from the seventeenth century to the

present. Unfortunately, none of these has as yet been given much by way of any sort of empirical grounding except in the most casual way.

The neo-Marxist perspective on relating space and place is best represented in the writings of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and his geographic interpreters. In his writing Lefebvre has focused on the *social production of the spaces* within which social life takes place (Elden 2004; Lefebvre 2009). Under capitalism, “abstract space” (the space produced by economic transactions and state policies) has “colonized” everyday life by means of both spatial practices (commodification and bureaucratization) and representations of space (discourses of planning and surveillance). Lefebvre looked for a movement against this colonization of concrete space (or place) to reclaim the spaces of everyday life. This could be accomplished by insurgent “counter-discourses” based on spaces of representation that build on memories and residues of an older “authentic” existence and new practices in concrete space. Merrifield (1993, 521; 525), for example, interprets Lefebvre as seeing space and place as dialectically related such that space is a “rootless, fluid reality of material flows” or “the realm of dispassionate ‘objects’ rationally ‘ordered in space,’” that Lefebvre called the “realm of the conceived,” whereas place “comprises the locus and a sort of stopping of these flows,” what Lefebvre called the “realm of the lived.” But this account seems to understate the degree to which “concrete space” (or place) for Lefebvre (he never uses the term place) signifies a “bottom-up” and autonomous reaction to the depredations of those agents of capital and the state whose dominance has produced abstract space. The use of the phrase “dialectically related” obfuscates rather than clarifies quite what the relationship is between abstract space and concrete place. Nevertheless, this framework does suggest

how uneven economic development is jointly produced by dominant practices and discourses but can only be challenged by and on behalf of people in places attempting to recapture concrete (place) space from the abstract space of modern capitalism (Soja 1989).

For the second perspective the focus lies in relating location to place through the experiences of human beings as agents. In one of the most sophisticated statements of this perspective, drawing most obviously on the pioneering writing of Tuan (1974), Robert Sack (1997, 58) provides the essential thrust when he writes that his “framework draws on the geographical experiences of place, space, home, and world which people use in their lives to integrate forces, perspectives, and selves.” From this point of view:

Place implies space, and each home is a place in space. Space is a property of the natural world, but it can be experienced. From the perspective of experience, place differs from space in terms of familiarity and time. A place requires human agency, is something that may take time to know, and a home especially so. As we move along the earth we pass from one place to another. But if we move quickly the places blur; we lose track of their qualities, and they may coalesce into the sense that we are moving through space (Sack 1997, 16).

In this frame of reference, places are woven together through space by movement and the network ties that produce places as changing constellations of human commitments, capacities, and strategies. Places are invariably parts of spaces and spaces provide the resources and the frames of reference in which places are made. Though how free individual persons are in actuality to make and miss opportunities in place making is far from clear.

The feminist perspective, broadly construed, is one that is both deeply suspicious of grand narratives that suppress multiplicity, difference, and alterity in their obsession with temporal transitions (from tradition to modern, etc.) and sympathetic to rethinking

space in terms of multiplicity and dislocation. In this framework, “places may be thought of as open articulations of connections” and “identities of subjects and identities of places constructed through interrelations not only challenge notions of past authenticities but also hold open the possibility of change in the future” (Massey 1999, 288). Place, then, includes location and place but without the central focus on individual human agency that brings these together in the humanist perspective and the division between representation and practice in the neo-Marxist. Here the emphasis is on places as sites in the *flow* of social relations. Place is seen as constituted out of space-spanning relationships, place-specific social forms, and a sense of place associated with the relative well-being, disruption, and experience of living somewhere. The experience of place is quite different for different groups, such as children, women, subordinated social classes, minorities, etc. Feminism claims that many accounts insist on denying this pluralism. In particular, the argument goes, they also privilege space by associating it with “high politics” and “Reason” and denigrate place as personified by home and the mundane lives of women and children (Massey 1994). Reasserting place, therefore, is a political as much as an intellectual move. It is about re-valorizing place not as the site of domesticity but as a meeting place for a “progressive” political agenda. From this perspective, other conceptualizations, particularly those that privilege space over place, tend to leave little likelihood of political change coming from bottom-up political organization (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2000). Though quite why the politics associated with a “progressive sense of place” must necessarily be progressive is not explained.

The performative perspective is similarly suspicious of grand theories but also finds problematic the division between representation and practice that most attempts at

relating space and place, particularly the neo-Marxist, tend to take for granted. In this view, as Nigel Thrift (1999, 317) claims, place is *associational*, weaving together “all manner of spaces and times” but it is never completed because it always depends on “further works of association.” Drawing on the post-humanist “actor-network theory” of Bruno Latour and others, but critical of its reluctance to engage with the “role of common ground” or place in “how networks echo back and forth,” Thrift (1999, 313) emphasizes the materiality of places as “open spaces” that practices make and that take “shape only in their passing” (Thrift 1999, 310). In this view, the particularities of any situation cannot be read off from the predictions of a grand theory. Rather, places are specific time-space configurations made up of the intersection of many encounters between “actants” (people and things) that reflect “*practical means of going on rather than something concerned with enabling us to see, contemplatively, the supposedly true nature of what something is*” (author’s emphasis, Thrift 1999, 304). Like in an Antonioni film, the placement and displacement of bodies and objects is more important than the chronology of events and actions. So, this theoretical viewpoint is as much epistemological (concerned with how we know) as ontological (concerned with what exists). We always look at “the world” from somewhere, from a place. Though this insight is hardly novel with Thrift, it does serve to reiterate that knowledge is always and everywhere geographically contextual and reflexive. Though there may be overtones here of old-fashioned vitalism and animating presences among objects, the meaning of a particular place, “its *genius loci*, depends upon the geniuses we locate there” (Bell 1997, 813), both living and dead. This position is much the most radical of the four in attempting to relate space and place together by raising the difficulty of ever thinking

beyond the confines of the space-time context in which we are embedded and the fact that there is a spatiality to social relationships even when “it is no longer necessary to download meaning onto a territory [place] or weave it into a land” (Jiménez 2003, 150). A problem here, of course, is how one can see over the horizon (as Thrift for one obviously does) if one is entirely limited by one’s immediate associations. We return here paradoxically, given the talk of relational networks, to a rather closed conception of place.

Each of these four positions offers a potential route towards overcoming the space-place conundrum. Of course, each emerges out of distinctive intellectual traditions and thus cannot be seen as a substitute for any one of the others on the road to overturning the dominance of either/or thinking about location and place. In other words, as I have tried to show, each has its own problems and potential. Perhaps the most significant shared problem is the failure to show the relevance, except in the most casual way, any has for the substantive empirical agendas of contemporary geography or other fields.

But there some shared emphases that are useful in orienting these theoretical positions towards a more operational focus. Perhaps the most important is the common focus on the construction of places through social practices. Gone is the sense of places as natural units inherited from time immemorial. Another, therefore, is the stress on the fluidity and dynamic character of places as they respond to interconnections with other places. Consequently, places tend to have permeable rather than fixed boundaries and are internally diverse rather than homogenous with respect to their social and other attributes even as they express a certain communality of experience and performance.

### **Putting Place(s) into Practice**

Clearly, therefore, much of the revived interest in place in its strong sense is process-oriented. Rather than just a “frame” for the investigation of gender, ethnic, class etc. categories, place now represents the ambition to show how complex and dynamic the cross-germination of such categories and the activities to which they refer can be. But it is hard to show this just theoretically without attention to more detailed mediating concepts that are more suitable for empirical purposes. Theorizing about place in general is only useful as a general orientation to understanding the effects of places in particular.

First of all, we need to take some definitional care. Place is used in a variety of ways but its meaning can be specified more clearly in terms of the three dimensions that tend to re-occur across the various theoretical positions and which can be examined empirically (Agnew 1987). The first dimension is place as *location* or a site in space where an activity or object is located and which relates to other sites or locations because of interaction, movement and diffusion between them. A city or other settlement is often thought of this way as always part of a system of places with mobility inherent in the relations between them. Second is the view of place as a series of *locales* or settings where everyday-life activities take place. Here the location is not just the mere address but the where of social life and environmental transformation. Examples would be such social settings from everyday life as workplaces, homes, shopping malls, churches, vehicles, etc., whose structuring of social interaction helps forge values, attitudes and behaviors. Some locales are not necessarily tied to particular locations and can be of no fixed or permanent abode (even though they are located in motion); for example vehicles and Internet chat rooms. The third dimension is place as *sense of place* or identification

with a place as a unique community, landscape, and moral order. In this construction, every place is particular and, thus, singular. A strong sense of “belonging” to a place, either consciously or as shown through everyday behavior such as participating in place-related affairs, would be indicative of “sense of place.” But this need be neither totalistic, in the sense of excluding other objects of affection or identity nor reactionary and exclusionary. Arguably, however, some sense of place (with a locality, nation-state, or world) is a necessary prerequisite for social solidarity and collective action.

Second, places are not bounded, isolated entities as conventional regional studies have tended to regard them. Rather, they are usually and perhaps increasingly in a globalizing world located in a series of extensive economic, political, and cultural *networks* with varying geographical scope. They are best thought of relationally. Ash Amin, for example, argues that all geographical concepts (e.g., place, territory, scale) that stress internal coherency and boundedness reify rather than reveal the logic of socio-spatial relations in a globalizing world. “In this emerging new order, spatial configuration and spatial boundaries are no longer purposively territorial or scalar, since the social, economic and political inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution” (Amin 2004: 33). Of course, geographers have long been interested in diffusion from place to place, from Carl Sauer to Torsten Hägerstrand and Lawrence Brown, but recent relational discussions of place have tended to lack any sense whatsoever of how much the field has actually been here theoretically, if not terminologically, before (see, e.g. Sauer 1952; Brown 1975).



Third, and even more radical in terms of uprooting the conventional spatial sense of place, nomads, travelers, temporary migrants, commuters, and other itinerants even while inherently mobile, also define places (more specifically, locales) with which to move and in which to rest and interact. Thus, rather than the opposite to or disruptive of place, *mobility* is an inherent part of how some places are defined and operate (Cresswell 2004). For example, commuting paths are very much part of the experience of place of many people and migrants often maintain social ties over long distances and thus acquire different senses of place than those of their more spatially rooted neighbors. The kinship, migrant itineraries, and ritual exchanges that form personhood do not necessarily require long histories of sedentary habitation. In a “frontier region” of East Java, for example, the anthropologist Konstantinos Retsikas (2007, 971-2) notes that place is a tool of sociality; by which he means that because people “move and stop, settle, and move again ... places are shifting and changing, always becoming through people’s engagements – material as well as discursive –in, through, and with them ... In other words, place is not where social relations simply take place, but an inherent ingredient of their modalities of actualization.”

Fourth, contexts of place and time are not best thought of as invariably regional or local, although they frequently have elements of one or both. Rather, they are best considered as always located somewhere with some contexts more stretched over space (such as means of mass communication and the spatial division of labor) and others more localized (school, workplace, and residential interactions). The balance of influence on social and political choices between and among the stretched and more local contextual processes can be expected to change over time, giving rise to subsequent shifts in

political outlooks and affiliations (e.g. Nicholls 2009). So, for example, as foreign companies introduce branch plants, trade unions must negotiate new work practices, which, in turn, erode long-accepted views of the roles of managers and employees. In due course, this sort of *configuration of contextual changes* can, for example, give an opening to a new political party or a redefined old one as interests, identities and political heuristics (yardsticks) shift and upset established political affiliations (see, e.g., Agnew 2007; Cutler 2007). But changes must always fit into existing cultural templates and cleavages that often show amazing resilience as well as adaptation. Doreen Massey (1999, 22) puts the overall point the best when she writes: “ This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of isolation – now to be disrupted by globalization – but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found together there.”

Fifth, though much has been made of the general impact of information and communications technologies for the declining significance of terrestrial places (and physical space), the networks they define always are grounded somewhere and in someone’s socio-spatial imagination (e.g. Legg 2009; Agnew 2009). Typically, if only because of the power of vested political interests, they reflect visions or fantasies of “located connection, not new virtual spaces” (Green et al. 2005, 817). The new technologies are part of new “*place-making projects*” rather than simply creating a totally new cyberspace world or making place irrelevant. For example, closely examining the governmental focus across Europe on “wiring up” in the late 1990s shows how much the

idea of network was used in practice to further very “specific place-making projects such as ‘Manchester,’ ‘Europe,’ and ‘Britain’” (Green et al. 2005, 807).

Finally, place is fundamental to understanding knowledge production and dissemination or as Livingstone (2007, 71), puts it “location and locution,” or the ways in which places provide both the social settings or *venues* in which new ideas develop (and to which they diffuse) and the claims to authority that rest on having been somewhere (doing fieldwork, hanging around, etc.) or, one might suggest, having attachments to certain educational institutions rather than to others (Jacob 2007). Of course, it is also from within places that the wider world is constructed. Indeed, what we understand by “space” emerges from the practices of philosophers, cartographers, scientists, and a host of others in their particular offices, homes, workplaces and laboratories. Knowledge creation and circulation are invariably situated somewhere (Schatzki 1991). Beyond mere location in space, therefore, from this perspective places really matter for what we think abstractly as well as what we do practically.

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