

Chapter 15

Place

Part I

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Review

There seems little doubt that place is one of the two or three most important concepts in the theory and practice of human geography. It has frequently featured in the titles of books on the notion of geography itself (Johnston 1991; Unwin 1992) or books on particular approaches to geography such as feminism (Johnson *et al.* 2000; Domosh and Seager 2001). The historical and ongoing importance of place points to the fact that it is fundamental to human existence, or, indeed, existence itself (Sack 1997; Casey 1997). Despite this self-evident importance place is a necessarily fuzzy concept. It is often used alongside or instead of a host of other related concepts including location, locale, region, space, territory and landscape. For most of the history of geography it has been more of a taken-for-granted concept than a carefully considered one. The word “place,” for instance, is there in the idea of central place theory but there is little to tell us about what place is within that theory. It is simply assumed to mean location (relative to other locations) (Christaller 1966).

This is, perhaps, place at its most elemental – *location*. Place refers to the where of something. This is a common usage in everyday speech. “What is the correct place for x?” is a question about where something belongs. Location is the first of Agnew’s three part definition of place that has stood the test of time: location, locale and sense of place (Agnew 1987). Location, as we have seen, refers to the where of something, either in an absolute sense according to some agreed measure such as longitude and latitude, or in a relative sense (35 miles east of Y). It was this kind of place that was invoked by Aristotle who argued that place “takes precedence over all other things” (Casey 1997: 51). The geographical question of “where” is key to Aristotle for everything that exists must be somewhere “because what is not

is nowhere – where for instance is a goat-stag or a sphinx?” (Aristotle in Casey 1997: 51). Place comes first, to Aristotle because everything that exists has to have a place – has to be located. Thus “that without which nothing else can exist, while it can exist without the others, must needs be first” (Casey 1997: 52). This argument is that things have to be *located*. Location often seems like the most trivial aspect of Agnew’s tripartite definition of place. A place is somewhere. But here, in Aristotle, we see that this aspect of place is possibly its most philosophically crucial characteristic. Place (as location) comes first. It is the bedrock of the possibility of existence.

The second of Agnew’s aspect of place is *locale*. Locale refers to the material context for social and cultural life – the fact that we live in a world of buildings, roads, parks, fields, etc. When we think of a place we tend not to think of an abstract location but of a particular collection of material things. If I say, “think of a place” you are not going to describe it to me as a set of co-ordinates. You might name it – Solsbury Hill, The Grand Canyon, Islington, Vancouver Island, Melbourne – and you might describe it in terms of its observable, tangible features. If I say I like the place Oxford, I do not mean its location (although it is convenient to reach it from West London where I live and from my parents’ home in West Oxfordshire) but I mean its High Street, the University Parks, the Colleges, the pub in Summertown where I used to drink at lunchtimes, the labyrinth of Blackwell’s bookshop, even the arcane desks of the Bodleian Library. I mean place as locale – a material world in which things happened during my life.

The third of Agnew’s place characteristics is *sense of place*. Sense of place refers to the way in which places are given meaning. When I wrote about Oxford (above) many of you probably felt some immediate connection regardless of whether you have been there or not. Oxford has a strong sense of place in an academic environment, amongst tourists and all watchers of *Inspector Morse*. Oxford’s sense of place to me results (mostly) from the fact that I grew up nearby for much of my childhood and early adulthood. I worked there in the summers. I fell in love there. I had picnics in the parks, I went on pub-crawls, I spent a good deal of time conducting research for my PhD there. These memories (and the fact that I still visit from time to time) mean that it has an intensely personal set of meanings for me – meanings that make it distinct from places I have never been – such as Sydney. This is the first way we attach meanings to place – through personal experience. But some places, such as Oxford, have heavily mediated senses of place too. We see them on television, read about them in novels, hear them in the cds we listen to, see them in films. Senses of place are mediated and shared. Oxford and its universities are constantly represented in particular ways that make it appealing to tourists for instance, who visit in the summer from around the world. I have never been to Sydney but it still has a sense of place for me – one that would be likely to change if and when I visit.

Place became a central object of geographical theorization in the 1970s with the advent of humanistic geography. It was this final aspect of place, its meaning, that lay at the centre of this line of enquiry. Geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan, Anne Buttimer, Edward Relph and David Seamon, demoralized by the abstraction of spatial science (including the descendants of central place theory) began to insist on the necessity of figuring out what place was in all its richness (Tuan 1974; Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Relph 1976). To them place was far more than location and

philosophically distinct from space. Place denoted a centre of meaning and field of care. It was a meaningful segment of space – somewhere we were experientially invested in and could develop attachments to. It needn't be a place in the conventional sense of a settlement like Oxford. It could be, as Tuan has argued, as small as a favorite chair in the corner of a room or as large as the whole earth as seen from the moon by homesick astronauts. A place could even move. A ship, inhabited for months on end by a crew, becomes a moving place. Even a particular chair and table space on an intercity train is momentarily made place-like as we read a book, listen to music, stretch out and eat a snack. To the humanist the term “place” named a particular relation between people and the world – a sense of “being in the world” borrowed from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Tuan 1971; Seamon 1979; Heidegger 1971; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Humanists put place at the centre of a human geography agenda. They made something that had always been there more explicit. Since the late 1970s place has remained a central concern of the discipline. In the 1980s and 90s critical geographers of different theoretical and political persuasions (Marxists, feminists, post-structuralists, etc) continued to use place but insisted on the role of power and politics in both the ways in which places are made and the role places play in the constitution of society. These were themes that had never been central to humanists. One of the ways we use the word place in everyday speech is in phrases such as “he was put in his place” or “she should know her place.” These suggest more than location in any strict sense, and more than a straightforward engagement with meaning. They suggest a notion of the proper or appropriate that is laden with power. Place in this sense combines the spatial with the social. Certain kinds of people (with particular genders, ethnicities, sexualities, ages, levels of [dis]ability and so on) are said to “belong” in different places and this notion of belonging is often defined by people with the power to define people according to place (Cresswell 1996; Sibley 1995). We are familiar with seemingly outdated notions such as “the woman's place in the home.” There are many, often unstated, varieties of this kind of logic concerning children (who should be seen and not heard), black people, gay people, the disabled and others. Place structures society by being used to define who and what belongs where and when. The meaning of place is rarely neutral or innocent. The 1990s saw a proliferation of studies of the role of place in processes of domination and resistance – in the practice of power. These included work on children (Valentine 1997), sexuality (Valentine 1993; Hubbard 2000; Bell *et al.* 1994), disability (Imrie 2000; Kitchin 1998), homelessness (Cloke *et al.* 2000; May 2000; Veness 1992), race (Delaney 1998; Keith and Pile 1993; Domosh 1998) and youth culture (Skelton and Valentine 1998).

By the end of the 1990s it was clear that places are saturated with notions of power. Place is not simply the result of individual or collective processes of meaning making but part of the process by which society is produced, reproduced and (occasionally) transformed. It was also in the 1990s that the notion of a “progressive” or “global” sense of place emerged from the work of Doreen Massey. Massey was responding (in part) to a suggestion by David Harvey that the “militant particularism” of some kinds of place politics could be very dangerous. He was referring to the urge some people (on both the right and left of the political spectrum) have to withdraw and cut themselves off from the globalised and connected world in which

we live. This is a tendency shared by some kinds of commune on the one hand, and some kinds of gated community on the other. These are practices that tend to withdraw into some notions of a purified place that can be defined against and defended from the rest of the world. Such a move, as Harvey suggests, is reactionary and dangerous (Harvey 1993). Massey responded to Harvey's suggestion that place based politics were likely to be reactionary by outlining an alternative "progressive" sense of place that was not defined by tightly drawn boundaries, an exclusive sense of identity (this is where "we" belong) or a singular notion of roots and history.

In Massey's account of a progressive (or global) sense of place she draws on her experience of Kilburn High Road in north London. In a colorful evocation of a place of constant mixing she reflects on the range of identities at play as she wanders down the street encountering a Moslem paper seller, passing a sari shop and an Irish pub with Irish Republican posters. This, she tells us, is a place made through its connections with the rest of the world. It is not a place defined by strict boundaries or any easy sense of a singular identity. Its histories are very much the histories of the connections (to Ireland, the empire, the Commonwealth, the global capitalist economy) that come together in a unique way in Kilburn (Massey 1993). To Massey this provides a model for thinking of place in general. All places are made in horizontal space by their connections, their role in networks that spread across the globe. Her essay marked a transformation from thinking of place vertically – as rooted in time immemorial – to thinking of it horizontally, as produced relationally through its connections. Such a notion of place, rather than being introverted and reactionary, is extrovert and politically hopeful.

Prospect

How might the concept of place be developed? We have inherited notions of place as meaningful space, as a sometimes reactionary form of insularity and as a progressive and open coming together of flows and connections. There have been suggestions of the demise of place for a while now with the advent of hyper-mobility, the internet, the mobile phone and global flows of capital and information (Augé 1995; Relph 1976; Castells 1996; Thrift 1994). But such predictions seem to have little purchase in a world where people still appear to inhabit their homes, do the garden, decorate the walls, sit in parks and go on holidays to sites they find interesting. No doubt our experience of place has qualitatively changed and has, in many ways, been augmented, but place is still quite clearly there. At least in Aristotle's sense, things still have to be somewhere.

A number of ideas in recent social theory have the potential to inform research on place in the coming years. Places are complex and dynamic collages of things (material culture, objects), representations (places as representations and representations of place) and practices (the things people do, often habitually). All of these aspects of place have been open to theoretical development in recent years (Cresswell and Hoskins 2008). The turn (back) to materiality in cultural theory has made its mark on geography (Miller 1997, 2008; Bennett 2001; Kopytoff 1986; Jacobs 2006; Jackson 2000). While the "new cultural geography" of the late 1980s and 1990s has been accused of turning its back on the solid, concrete materiality of place and landscape in favor of more ethereal notions of text, performance and representation,

more recent work has sought to examine the specific roles played by “things” in the ongoing geography of everyday life. This has involved a much closer attention to the physical properties of the “stuff” that surrounds us and forms the micro and macro level topographies and textures of place and landscape. Places continue to be implicated in the work and play of representation. Places, themselves, are representational. They continue to be marketed and sold for businesses and tourism. They continue to project power and authority, whether private and corporate or public and political. Exactly how they do this and how the material properties of place are enrolled in this is an important ongoing question that can be informed by both new work on material culture but also by work that inhabits the blurred borderlands between the brutal solidity of things and the hazy world of (for instance), enchantment and the spectral (Pile 2005; Adey and Maddern 2008).

Places are also stages for, and made through, the loosely allied notions of practice, performance and the performative. This, of course, was the insight of David Seamon’s work on body routines and place ballets from the 1980s (Seamon 1980). It was also at the centre of approaches to place and time-geography influenced by structuration theory (Pred 1984). Places are made by the sometimes repeated, sometimes surprising things that people do in them. The daily commute, the school run, the opening and closing of shops, museums, service providers – all of these produce a kind of drama in place that helps to make the place what it is. Work on the embodied doing of place has been influenced by theorists of practice, performance and embodiment (Butler 1996; Bourdieu 1990; de Certeau 1984) as well as my vitalist, phenomenological and non-representational philosophies (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Shotter 1993; Serres 1995; Massumi 2002). This has led to a flowering of work on qualities, emotions, affects and affordances in place that has revived some aspects of humanistic engagements with place under a new guise and informed by new thinking (McCormack 2003; Dewsbury 2000; Kraftl and Adey 2008; Latham and McCormack 2004).

Places as Assemblages

Places are increasingly thought of as the interplay of these realms of the material, the immaterial and representational. One key approach that might allow us to examine this interplay creatively is “assemblage theory.” Assemblage theory is derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and is developed most fully by Manuel De Landa (De Landa 2006). De Landa is seeking to develop a new theory of society that avoids the pitfalls of theoretical and methodological individualism – an approach that breaks everything down to its smallest essential parts – and forms of holism or structuralism that insist on the overpowering efficacy of overarching systems – such as capitalism or “society.” In De Landa’s work he insists on an ontology derived from the connections between people and things (De Landa 2006). His outline of assemblages includes everything from face to face meetings to the constitution of nation-states:

This is because assemblages, being wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts, can be used to model any of these intermediate entities: interpersonal networks and institutional organizations are assemblages of people; social justice

movements are assemblages of several networked communities; central governments are assemblages of several organizations; cities are assemblages of people, networks, organizations, as well as of a variety of infrastructural components, from buildings and streets to conduits for matter and energy flows; nation-states are assemblages of cities, the geographical regions organized by cities, and the provinces that several regions form. (De Landa 2006: 5–6)

De Landa defines the concept of assemblage along two dimensions. One dimension connects the *material* to the *expressive*. The other connects *territorialization* to *detrterritorialization*. Let us consider each in turn. A material role is played by the physical properties of things. De Landa gives the following example: “Community networks and institutional organizations are assemblages of bodies, but they also possess a variety of other components, from food and physical labor, to simple tools and complex machines, to the buildings and neighborhoods serving as their physical locales” (De Landa 2006: 12). Expressive roles refer to such obviously symbolic capacities inherent in language and symbols but also to the capacities of non-linguistic social expressions (such as ‘body-language’ or meaningful actions of obeying or disobeying commands for instance). Processes of territorialization are processes that tend to add coherence to an assemblage while processes of detrterritorialization are ones which are destabilizing and tend to dilute an assemblage. In the first instance this is a spatial process where spatial boundaries are either sharpened or blurred. But these processes also refer to forces which increase homogeneity (territorializing) or heterogeneity (detrterritorializing).

The concept of territorialization must be first of all understood literally. Face-to-face conversations always occur in a particular place (a street-corner, a pub, a church), and once the participants have ratified one another a conversation acquires well-defined spatial boundaries. Similarly, many interpersonal networks define communities inhabiting spatial territories, whether ethnic neighborhoods or small towns, with well defined borders. (De Landa 2006: 13)

To De Landa the breaking down of an assemblage into parts that play both material and expressive roles is an analytical exercise while the focus on territorialization is synthetic “since it is in part through the more or less permanent articulations produced by this process that a whole emerges from its parts and maintains its identity once it has emerged” (De Landa 2006: 14).

Let’s consider place as an assemblage. As we have seen, place clearly has a *material* aspect as evidenced by all the things (both solid and more ethereal) that go into making up the topography and textures of place. The buildings, ‘natural’ topography, open spaces, junk, commodity goods, conduits, roadways and the whole multitude of objects that combine in a particular location. Places also have *expressive* capacity. Most obviously, perhaps, there are *territorializing* functions at play in place. Political boundaries, labeling, mapping, place promotion, forms of representation, naming and all the individual and group practices that are characteristic of a place all act to hold the assemblage of a particular place together. Similarly there are *detrterritorializing* forces at play in place that erode, replace or dissipate elements in the place assemblage. The flight of capital, forms of communication technology, movement in and out of place all operate in extroverted and centrifugal ways.

Any process which either destabilizes spatial boundaries or increases internal heterogeneity is considered deterritorializing. A good example is communication technology, ranging from writing and a reliable postal service, to telegraphs, telephones and computers, all of which blur the spatial boundaries of social entities by eliminating the need for co-presence: they enable conversations to take place at a distance, allow interpersonal networks to form via regular correspondence, phone calls or computer communications, and give organizations the means to operate in different countries at the same time. (De Landa 2006: 13)

These deterritorializing processes are not supposed to be morally or ideologically negative. Assemblages may still be strong but simply more spread out and heterogeneous. Massey's global sense of place clearly includes very strong deterritorializing processes.

Thinking of places as assemblages focuses attention on the fact that places, as instances of the particular, are always neither essentialist entities (they could always be otherwise and the particular way that they are is a product of history) nor are they overarching totalizing systems. The notion of assemblage resonates with efforts within geography to conceptualize place as a particular instance of a combination of things that are often held apart. We have already seen how Massey has conceptualized place as a site produced through relations with an outside – as an extroverted site of connections where things (people, ideas) from elsewhere merge in a particular kind of way (Massey 1993, 2005). We might also think of the work of Sack who has long argued for a vision of place as an entangled weave of strands from the realms of nature, social relations and meaning. He has argued that theorists have tended to approach the geographical world from one or the other of these realms – as an expression of nature, society or culture. If we start from place, instead of thinking of it as an expression of something else, he suggests, then we can see the way that place interweaves all three realms and cannot be reduced to any of them (Sack 1997, 1992).

Conclusion

Future work on place needs to theorize and exemplify the assemblage qualities of place. This will involve both itemizing the material and expressive qualities of place and accounting for the processes that hold place together and those that are more centrifugal (Jones 2009). Massey's account of a global sense of place has had a powerful hold on theorization of place over the last decade. Clearly places are made through their connections to the world beyond. Precise accounting for this process has been notably absent. Why do flows combine in the way they do, exactly where they do? Answering such questions involves re-focusing on the vertical aspects of place – the “thereness” of a particular location and locale that is both the product of horizontal flows and a reason for those flows combining precisely there.

Think of Schiphol airport, a major international hub just outside Amsterdam. It is the fourth busiest airport in Europe. Airports are frequently thought of as archetypes for non-place or the space of flows (Augé 1995; Castells 1996). If any place is defined by its connections it is an international ‘hub’ airport. I once spent three weeks in this airport conducting research on mobility (see chapter 9 in Cresswell 2006). While I was there I shared lunch with a homeless man who lived in the airport during the day.

He traveled daily on trains while the airport was closed during the night. He knew the place well. He knew where to sleep undisturbed, where to get food and reading material, where to watch the planes. He remembered arriving at this airport with his ex-wife with hopes of a new life in a new place. He came from Curacao in the Dutch Antilles. This man was in the airport for the affordances it offered him; the shelter, warmth, food, reading materials. He was also there because of its direct connection to the Dutch empire. And Schiphol is where it is because of the available land on the old polder where an agricultural way of life was fading. It is there because of its connections to Amsterdam and because, on the North West coast of Europe it provides a good location for making connections between flights to different parts of Europe and other continents. Schiphol, in other words, is a place (like any other but more exaggerated than most) that combines material and expressive qualities and territorializing and deterritorializing processes. It is a place that forms and reforms daily through the connections and flows that partly constitute it. But those connections connect precisely there because of where and what Schiphol is. Its vertical and horizontal qualities combine to make it what it is. One direction for the future theorization of place is to think of place as an assemblage that combines material, expressive and practical components in particular ways that reflect the constant recombination of vertical roots and horizontal routes.

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