

A Sense of Place and Region

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Notes for a Talk

...it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it - "the world around here" (Geertz 1996: 261-2).

Definitions

What do we mean by place and region? What constitutes these often taken-for-granted identities? Furthermore what sort of entity is a place? A long standing assumption is that there is something natural or essential about the identities of regions and places. Despite this naturalistic tendency, we are all aware that regions and places have historical identities, while others, such as *'The City of Edmonton'* are juridical, legislated into being, and have identities which have accreted on the basis of some political-administrative status.

In our references to places, we might invoke a *'sense of place'*, the title of numerous texts. The geographer, Anssi Passi, points out that a place is a location or context manifesting itself in the social negotiation of spatial identities (2003:141). They are inevitably political even in the context of everyday life. Doreen Massey notes that region is not inevitably strictly bounded nor exclusive but is rather a context where the particular and the universal intersect (Massey 1995).

Socialness of Space

Even if a site on the globe is already remarkable, the topology is also over-written with often-contradictory 'place-images' (Shields 1991a; 1991b) to create a general 'place-myth'. Before we encounter a specific place or region, we generally have some information and preconception about them. We can elaborate on this cultural or informational spatial sensibility by distinguishing between the identity of a place or region itself consisting of distinguishing 'natural' features, histories of habitation, meaning-making and development. But a consciousness of the particularity of a region is different: it is not solely a result of individual perception of its distinguishing features but also a result of the ongoing and public pedagogy including all of the mechanisms of the production of collective identity and interpellation of individuals to social worlds through imagined communities (Anderson 1991) and learned, prosthetic memories [] Cohen []).

This sense of place is something that must be continually reproduced through practice and discourse, and through institutional activities. We find this in, for example, touristic and promotional 'place-myths'. Topography is only one component of geographical identities. What might merely be notable or strategically advantageous land is only the geological foundation of a mythic landscape of historic national events, memory nationalist history, not to mention advertising images. Visual Representations, literature and folk tales, small and tall-, are aspects of the spatialisation of a site or region.

The sense of place I am delineating transcends the purely 'natural' and material, and we must look beyond the environment of the site - and even beyond the site itself to properly understand a 'sense of place'. Any site is obviously interconnected with other places. However we can go further to say that it is part of an overall, relational network or landscape of similarly mythified sites and regions in which each place is distinguished not only by its proper place-myth but by its distinctiveness and contrasts with other sites. This geography of difference is socially-constructed over the long term and constitutes a *spatialisation* of places and regions as 'places-for-this' and places-for-that'. That is, each site or area is construed as appropriate for certain social activities and behaviours - and this is central to its identity. Places and regions are cast - or spatialised - as certain types of place: romantic, harsh, warm, boring, polluted, foreign and so on. The 'first nature' of topology is reconstructed as a 'second nature' (Lefebvre 1976).

Place is not just a matter of real estate or landed property; it is intellectual property, cultural property. This is hardly a fixed system of coordinates, rather it is a relational network of differences which provides the principle and rationale for movement between places and regions. Rather than a fixed structure, the process of spatialisation is a fluid and contested horizon of meanings.

Geopolitics

This understanding is social and anchored in performative practices which range from discourses through to the activities of bodies, organizations and machines. But it is also relational: In contrast with much research on places, which refers primarily to the elements and crowds assembled at a site to create its ambiance, I argue that one must be equally attentive to what is excluded and also to those elements of a place's identity that lie elsewhere, and which inflect both the material and social elements of the sight itself. What remains elsewhere includes the contrasts and distant places in relation to which an experience of a place is constructed. A place might be said to realize or to embody a regional character, but these statements are always made with a view to contrasting some quality of the place (or region) with the qualities of other places (or regions).

What and who are missing can be counter-intuitive questions but they reveal regional, geopolitical struggles over what is present. Spatialisation can be a vehicle of repression in subtle ways. Constituting regions is closely related to constructing hierarchical relations of centre and periphery. The framework of regions is not only put in place as an act of geopolitical power but is part and parcel of the consolidation and reproduction of power relations. Spatialisations are the subjects of struggle because of their power to influence social reproduction in a manner in which it is difficult to trace the authorship of its normative arrangement of places, regions and entire states. Hence the battle for spatialisation is not just a question of perpetuating memories but of framing the future.

Much of North America is an 'erased space' where doctrines of *Terra nullis* turned a blind eye to not only histories but ongoing realities of indigenous occupation. This goes beyond, for example, renaming features on maps. It is the foundation for subsequent occupation and land use which erases previous rights. Of the many cultural forms of rights to place, 'private property' - the spatialisation of the land as a gridded mosaic of alienated, commodified 'lots' is only one relatively recent geopolitical form.

Each place-myth is the locus of intense struggle over its meaning. Places are taken up from the raw topological diversity of the land and integrated into a meaningful human geography which is contested by individuals and different cultural groups. This differential *social spatialisation* is the basis of our geographical sense of the world as a space of distinctions, difference and distance (Shields 1991b). Yet it is not unified system, merely a regime of spacings with pretensions to hegemonic status.

Spatialisation ties together the cultural conception of the environment with individual bodies to sediment, in a practical and physical manner, social reproduction in line with place-myths (however contested or only pretending to the status of the hegemonic). It embraces not only spatial patterns but temporal rhythms. *Place is a memory-bank for societies* inscribed and read in ways which are sometimes ritualized but always much more embodied than merely visual. Place takes on this memory-function by virtue of retaining and displaying the inscribed traces of rhythmic repetition of routines in time and space in a manner which is relatively difficult for a single individual to erase or for a small group to change in a short time without the investment of a great deal of effort (the wholesale and total destruction of a city, for example).

Spatialisation and Bodies

In the process of social spatialisation, places are not only overcoded, but inter-related via classification schemes and reifying divisions into, for example, locals' and tourists' parts of a city, safe and dangerous areas, ours' and theirs', work and leisure places. More than mere function is at issue. This 'production of space' concerns social and cultural reproduction and interaction. People learn the comportment associated with a place as well as with their social status and gender. Spatialisation is thus not only a matter of sites and networks of space but exists at all levels to tie the micro scale of the body to the macro scale of the region. Bodies are 'spaced': the performative carriage of the body, the gestures, actions and rhythms of everyday routines deemed socially appropriate to a particular site are etched onto place and into the somatic memory of individual inhabitants. This 'spacing' of bodies is central to the causative power of such places, as their status or the need to act in accordance with the norms of the site in order to accomplish a collective spatial performance of a place (getting on an off of a bus) or an occasion (laying a commemorative wreath), is directly manifested in peoples' actions. In this manner, cultural abstractions such as values or memories become embodied and material interactions. Seen in this light, place, and ore importantly 'spatialisation' is causative.

Yet such a practical, somatic *hexis* is usually not recalled except with an awkward self-consciousness when one finds oneself 'out of place', as the idiomatic expression puts it. Spatialisation is thus both written and read practically by bodies as much as metaphorically through the conceptual operations of discourse.

Goffman has referred to these as 'meaning frames' (1974). Others have referred to habitual routines (Bourdieu 1982) and to 'scripts' for everyday interaction — however contested or renegotiated 'on the fly' (Smith 1987). Fuelled by sentiments of inclusion, belonging, and connectedness to the past, sense of place roots individuals in the social and cultural soils from which they have sprung together, holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood. (Basso 1996:85). At the core of spatialisation is a process of simplifying for cognitive purposes, and of stereotyping as a pragmatic strategy for everyday life. If place is the 'tip of the iceberg' of spatialisations, it is a prosthesis of perception, presenting a rich source of 'metaphors we live by' but also smuggling in stereotypes which are a form of cultural anaesthesia to the diversity and detail of everyday experience (Feldman in Seremetakis 1994).

We talk about a “sense of place”,. Where does this sense reside? In people as a sense or tacit form of knowledge or in geography? What if the sense of place was a form of sensation (exteroceptive) like a sense of balance? Turns of phrase such as ‘sense of place’ blur the physical sensorium into cultural forms of awareness and attunement.

As a cognitive and practical *habitus*, social spatialisation is a source not only of social algorithms (cf. Bourdieu 1972) but of allegorical solutions (attempting to solve new problems or cultural conundrums by metaphorically assimilating them to established routines or to the implied nexus of behavioural codings implicit in a place-myth), differentiating categories (for example, ‘right’ versus ‘left’ and ‘near’ versus ‘far’, and conceptual shortcuts including stereotypes and ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1979). Spatialisation is an integral part of our sense of the good life, a cultural sense of how we compose ourselves within the events of everyday life. On this basis alone it is easy to tie a sense of place to health and well-being.

Ineffable Places and Regions

Social spatialisations are social formations which connect the here and now, the ‘near’, or the face-to-face and present-at-hand, to the ‘distant’, the future and the possible. They connect what could be called the ‘*real*’ in a place which is nominally present at hand with its intangible or ‘*virtual*’ qualities, its potentialities: What a place can be, what its good for, who might belong to it and how, and what people can become there.

Any local place has this virtual complement of spatial and temporal excess. At places specifically arranged for it - spatialised as sites of commemoration - or where ‘virtual’ elements are invoked by memory work a form of virtual proximity brings everything close-up (Murdock 1993: 535; compare my analysis of classically ‘modernist’ constructions of the local and distant in Shields 1992a). Some places have no materiality at all: these non-space places are virtual sites of desire and fear - utopia, heaven, hell - and regions of the unknown or unknowable.

Rather than fixed, self-referential and inwardly-oriented, place-myths are even more in-circulation within an increasingly globalized flow of cultural information, commodities and people. Place-images are ‘sampled’ and overdubbed, becoming carriers for new sentiments and values. Their specificity is diffused. ‘Flow’ is crucial for it is in the in-between moment of indexical referentiality and counterpoint between places that spatialisation takes on its importance (Shields 1997b). Thus spatialisation is even less a fixed structure, but constitutes a virtual space of possible movements and anticipations of what follows from a given action in a given site, and what alternative courses of action are possible. Even as boundary-marking and the construction of spatial identities becomes more fragile, more fraught and obviously artificial, the importance of local place-images and myths increases as a counterpoint to the received images of other places and spaces is increased, along with the role of the physical environment as an anchor for the spatialisation of the place as a certain kind or character of site:

The sense of interconnectedness imposed on us by the mass media, by rapid travel, and by long-distance communication obscures this more than a little. So does the featurelessness and interchangeability of so many of our public spaces, the standardization of so many of our products, and the routinization of so much of our daily existence. The banalities and distractions of the way we live now lead us, often enough, to lose sight of how much it matters just where we are and what it is like to be there. (Geertz 1996: 261-2)

A 'critical regionalism' (Frampton []) which recognizes and celebrates place and region while attending to the operations of power and the spatial and historical exclusions and xenophobias which accompany hegemonic spatialisations could make a useful contribution to a renewed sense of place.

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