SYMBOLIC SPACE

Representations of space in geography and anthropology

by

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ABSTRACT. The discourse on space in geography has reached a dead-end because it asks a wrong set of questions. Instead of asking which notion of space is the correct one, we should rather look upon space as a cultural construction and allow for multiple spaces in our analysis. This implies a shift of focus, from theoretical speculations about space to the empirical contexts in which various spaces are constructed and articulated. The article demonstrates how space is constructed in South India and in Malagasy, and how those constructs are related to migration patterns and to state formation. The validity of a semiotic approach to space is demonstrated by applying it to the recent Gulf War and to the Salman Rushdie case.

The recent discourse on ‘space’ in geography has centered upon the three conceptions of absolute, relative, and relational space used by Harvey in his classical analysis of ‘Social Justice and the City’ (Harvey 1973), asking which of the three is the correct one. Each of the three spaces has its proponents. Gore demonstrates how an absolute notion of space has produced tautological theories of regional development, and opts for a relational notion of space, according to which space is a quality of objects and not a thing in itself (Gore 1984). In contrast, Simon Duncan adheres to a relative conception of space in coping with locality. According to him, relative space permits a distinction between causal social processes and contingent spatial effects, and is thereby fit for a realist approach (Duncan 1989). More recently, Stern seems to imply an absolute concept of space in his synergetic approach to the question of regional growth and development (Stern 1992).

Ontologically, it is possible to argue in favour of all these spaces. But problems emerge when the various spaces are applied in analyses of real world phenomena. Empirical descriptions of places or regions either tend to end up in ‘spatial separatism’ as argued by Gore (ibid), or space is simply eliminated from analysis altogether, as noted by Hallin (1990).

I shall claim that the discourse on space in geography has reached a dead-end because it has, in one respect, departed from Harvey’s initial application of his three concepts; but also, in another respect, precisely because it has clung to Harvey’s three spaces.

Recently, the space discourse has been a battle over which conception of the phenomenon should be the correct one, and which ones should be rejected. But twenty years ago, Harvey treated space contextually: “The question “what is space?” is therefore replaced by the question “how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?” “ (ibid. p. 13–14). In order to understand and describe society, therefore, we must allow for various conceptions of space, which are created by human activity, in our analyses. Harvey also makes use of this acknowledgement in his methodology, since … “space becomes whatever we make of it during the process of analysis rather than prior to it” (ibid p. 13).

A first condition for a fruitful discourse on space, therefore, is to treat it contextually, as Harvey did. Various spaces emerge in different social contexts, and our energy should be spent on understanding those contexts rather than searching for a ‘real’, once-and-for-all definition of space.

But in coping with contextually constructed space, we must not confine ourselves to the three constructs of absolute, relative, and relational space. Indeed, Harvey has demonstrated that his three spaces can yield valuable insight into the manner in which American cities are constituted, but his brilliant analysis should not make us blind to the possibility that space is constructed differently in other places and at other times. Harvey’s concepts, being borrowed from the European philosophers Newton, Einstein, and Leibnitz, should not be canonized a priori as an exhaustive list of possible spaces. Since space is constructed by dif-
different human practices, and since human practice is highly variable, the second condition is that we must allow for multiple constructions of space in our theories.

In this article, I shall address three questions which are fundamental to the search for a fruitful approach to the phenomenon of space. The first to ask is what spatial units are when they are not only absolute, relative, or relational units. The second question is how such units are produced; and the third turns upon the relationship between space and social processes.

First question: What is space?
Twenty years ago Clifford Geertz questioned the way cultures are described in anthropology. Since anthropological studies are texts, their contents are divorced from the reality they endeavour to describe (Geertz 1973). In other words, ethnographic accounts are just re-presentations of the others. Any datum is a representation and thereby an interpretation; raw data do not exist. Similarly, Akselsen and Jones have shown that the map—the geographer’s equivalent to the ethnographic account—is also an interpretation: “... every map is the product of a particular, socially conditioned conception of space, and therefore a mental map” (Akselsen and Jones 1987, p. 461). Let me therefore reformulate the question of what space is, to ask how space can be represented.

One way to represent space is suggested by the anthropologist Bird David (1992), in her criticism of Marshall Sahlins’ classical analyses of “the Original Affluent Society” (Sahlins 1972). Sahlins ponders over the observation that hunters and gatherers live in happy abundance on the yields of an unstable nature. He explains their unconcerned lives in terms of a firm conviction that nature is inexhaustible. This is a cultural hypothesis. The mistake Sahlins then commits, says Bird David, is that he puts to test a cultural hypothesis (confidence) by quantitative, positive data—time spent on gathering, distance to hunting grounds, and amount of food brought to the camp.

Instead of such a test, Bird David recommends an interpretation where the point is to find metaphors in our Western culture that match the semantic meaning of metaphors used by the hunter-gatherers in their construction of nature. The Western metaphor Bird David finds is the bank! Nature is to hunter-gatherers like the bank is to us. We are confident that we can extract our balance from the bank at any time, even if we know that the bank cannot disburse the total debit to all its customers at once. And like money in the bank, resources that are not extracted from nature can grow. The bank metaphor yields better meaning to the harmonious life-worlds of hunter-gatherers than does Sahlins’ quantitative analyses, argues Bird David.

Bird David’s use of what we may call parallel metaphor representations is interesting and tempting, but it does also involve a serious pitfall. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the essence of metaphor is that one thing or phenomenon is understood in terms of another, more experience-near thing. In other words, our knowledge of the object that is metaphorized is structured by the more intimately known thing from which the metaphor is borrowed. In Bird David’s case this means that we understand hunter-gatherers’ cultural construction of nature in a similar manner that we understand our own banking system. Some aspects of our banking and their nature are undoubtedly sufficiently similar for metaphorization to be appropriate. But the problem is how far we should extend the metaphor. It would be rather absurd to transfer ideas of minibanks, fees, banking crisis, and fusions, on hunter-gatherers’ conceptions of nature!

Being careful not to apply Bird David’s parallel metaphor representations uncritically, we should listen to the anthropologist Schneider (1984). He demonstrates how analyses of kinship systems assumes a different meaning when he applies emic terms to the objects—the kinsfolk—than when describing the systems in conventional ethic terms of “Father’s Brother”, “Sister’s Son”, etc. In accordance with this, he recommends us to apply the terms—the words—people apply in their own language as representations. The task of the ethnographer is to interpret the term—to fill it with semantic substance that invokes similar ideas in the language of the ethnographer. Let us see where such an exercise leads us when applied to empirical conceptions of space.

The Tamils of South India use two terms for village (Daniel 1984). The first, kiramam, is also called revenue village in official English terminology. Kiramam is a clearly delimited space that is primarily constructed for administrative purposes. The other term for village is ur. When Tamils identify their homes, they apply this term.

Daniel is interested in how villagers themselves ascribe significance to the conceptual distinction between the two. In other words, his ambition is to
find how Tamil representations of the two spaces are constructed. For this, the anthropologist Daniel applies the well-known geographical method of mental map-making.

The experiment produces two basically different results. The informants invited to the experiment demarcated kiramam with a boundary, while ur was identified by marking the temple, the road junction, the river, and the shrines. It thus seems that Tamils construct space in two manners. First, they conceptualize space as a container—a category with a clear boundary to other similar categories. But they also conceptualize space as a prototype—a space that has a meaning beyond being a mere abstraction. Ur has no clear boundary, but rather a notion of an undefined frontier.

Daniel takes a special interest in ur and searches for the ideas that make ur a prototype. The answer is found in the Tamil version of Hindu cosmology. Tamils do not conceive of an ontological distinction between idea and substance, between nomen and phenomenon; everything consists of substance. The substance is various blends of five basic elements—humours—and the specific mixture of these makes a stone a stone and an idea an idea, and differentiate man from woman, Brahmin from Sudra, etc. An ur is also a specific blend of substance, and any ur has its unique mixture. A person is most happy when her substance is complementary to the substance of the ur where she lives. Tamil happiness is better translated into harmony, and harmony is achieved when the substance of an ego is complementary—balanced—to the substance of one's ur, and also to one's spouse, house, and diet. When people's substance is not in balance with the substance of ur, it may result in illness on the part of the humans, or in failed harvest or land degradation in ur.

This cultural logic can explain—in the sense of give meaning to—many kinds of observable spatial behaviour in Tamil Nadu, and possibly in India generally. Let us look at migration.

The phenomenon of chain migration is frequently described in publications on human mobility, including in India. It means that people tend to migrate to cities or abroad where kinsfolk or neighbours have already settled. Sociologically, such migration streams are explained by the existence of social networks, in which communication and services flow in mutually reciprocal relations in such a way that newcomers are assisted in finding job and accommodation.

Daniel's analysis adds, however, a new dimension to the phenomenon on part of Tamils. Neighbours, relatives, and fellow caste members have approximate the same blend of substance as oneself, through generations of substance exchange with the same ur. When a neighbour lives happily in Calcutta or in Bergen, it is proved that substance from one's ur is compatible to the ur of those cities, and thereby the risk of illness or other misery is minimized.

How should we cope with the Tamil construction of space in our homely discourse? Is it appropriate to force ur into one of Harvey's three concepts of space, or must we add a fourth one, called "substance space"? If so, another ethnography which I shall refer to below, will extend the list by a fifth concept—"ancestral space", etc.

The conclusion thus far is that space can be constructed and represented in a multitude of ways—as a bank, a container, a substance, or a square kilometer. They are all equally meaningful in some contexts and in relation to some cosmologies—or ontologies. Giving one answer to the question of what space is—or three answers for that matter—is to violate the complex and rich global variation in the cultural construction of space. Space is what people make it to be. Let me therefore temporarily be a relativist and leave the question of what space is to the culture in question. Rather than speculating on the impossible question of what space really is, the task of geography should rather be to ask how symbolic space is socially produced. And thereby I have reached the second question posed above.

Second question: How is space produced?

Not only anthropologists practice semiotics. John Eyles is concerned with the symbolic production of new localities in Canadian and English suburbs (Eyles 1987). He starts by studying housing advertisements, and notes that agents not only try to sell bricks and cement, but also style and locality. The advertisements invoke ideas of history and nature, manipulating values in the hegemonic Western ideology of the good life. Since modern man in the West creates identity by consumption rather than by production, creativity is implied in consumption. Choices of way of life—house, locality, car, clothes etc.—are also production of specific ways of life. When buyers choose houses in a locality given a certain meaning in advertisements, they therefore simultaneously produce locality. Through symbolic processes like this, individual
identity (choice of house, site, etc.) is enmeshed in the reproduction of society (the hegemonic value system).

On a higher scale level, Gore (ibid.) raises the question of why regional planning is perpetually practiced all over the world, under labels of functional or territorial models, when they all suffer from logical inconsistency by applying concepts of space that have proved their worth in physics only.

Gore’s answer is that the term regional planning acts as a metonym for two other processes, namely, private accumulation of capital in the periphery and legitimation of political authority. By using positive metaphors like regional balance and growth pole, ordinary people are misled to believe that planning is carried out to their own benefit.

Gore concludes his critique of development theory and space by pointing towards a critical geography that might be further informed by Habermas or Foucault. Gore himself does not reach beyond suggesting a kind of power bias in regional development theory, parallel to Lipton’s urban bias.

Quite off the track of contemporary mainstream anthropology, some anthropologists follow in the path of structuralism, claiming that space is ultimately produced in the context of global power structures, orchestrated by the logic of late capitalism (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1992). But another anthropologist, Rofel, warns against all such master texts—whether they are derived from Marx, liberalism, or Foucault (Rofel 1992). If we look around, we discover many local variants of modernism, where traits of capitalist mode of production and European enlightenment rationality are blended with fundamentally different cultural logics. Heeding Rofel’s warning, I shall proceed to the third question by letting my argument be informed by a spatial constellation at another place and at another time, rather than listen to one of the many master narratives that might be the alternative.

Third question: How is space related to social processes?

The other place is the old kingdom of Merina in Malagasy. In this ethnography I shall try to assemble all the three questions raised in this article. The ambition is to describe how space is given cultural meaning, how this meaning is manipulated in the socio-political production of space, and how the production of space is related to social life in general.

Merina people use their dead ancestors to construct locality—home space—which they label ny tany. In contrast to the unified Tamil world, Merina are concerned with the duality of the world. The world consists of a spiritual, moral sphere where ancestors exist, and a physical, sensual world of the living. The home of the living is the space around the ancestral tomb. The ancestral tomb is the basic idea of the spatial prototype ny tany.

The sphere of the ancestors is a source of fertility and creativity for the living. Merina believe that they have a transactional relationship to the ancestors. They must participate in rituals in the tomb—a kind of secondary funeral—in order to obtain fertility and a good life in return from the ancestors. The elders of the family have a special position as go-betweens, conveying sacrifices from the living to the ancestors and blessings and creativity the other way.

A Norwegian missionary told me with much dismay that Merina peasants spend up to 40 percent of their annual household budget on secondary funerals. But if we are serious about Merina cosmology, we should not be dismayed. The anthropologist Maurice Bloch finds a clear parallel between the Merina relation to their ancestors and our Western relation to capital. Merina as well as modern Western man have devalued the creative qualities of humans and attributed them to inanimate substance. Merina have fetishised dead ancestors, and Western man has similarly fetishised commodities and money, in a symbolic form called capital (Bloch 1989).

The ideas of ancestral creative powers and the duality of existence are basic organisational principles in Merina culture, and gives meaning to space, to rituals, and to social life in general.

The relationship between culturally constructed space and social processes emerges if we move to a higher geographical level, and look at the way Merina tribes were brought under one centralized kingdom in the late eighteenth century.

The first legendary Merina king, bearing the pleasant name of Andrianampoinimerina, is merited with the achievement of having assembled the four Merina tribes into a centralized state. Bloch (ibid.) describes how he solved the universal problem of claiming legitimate authority by redefining the symbolic construction of the creative pow-
ers of the ancestors and the duality of the world. The king somehow managed to obtain a symbolic position between the living and the ancestors through the performance of grand ancestral rituals, redefining all Merina as one kinship group in which he was the symbolic father and head. In that way he legitimized that taxes and loyalty flowed from the people to him, and further, to the ancestors through the royal rituals. Blessings and creativity flowed in the opposite direction, from the ancestors to the king, and from him to the people.

The problem is to understand how the king accomplished this masterpiece of statesmanship. The answer is offered in the historical ethnography of Susan Kus (1987). If we put the two ethnographies together, we see that the king solved the problem of legitimacy by the ingenious move of building two capitals!

The one, Antananarivo—the present capital—was the centre of commerce and administration. The city was carefully planned with appointed areas for the six aristocratic Merina castes, so that the population represented the various hierarchical strata in the new nation.

The other capital—Ambohimanga—was localized in a different part of the country. Here was the king's ancestral tomb, where he carried out the royal rituals. This city, including the king's palace and his ancestral tomb, was built by craftsmen carefully recruited from all parts of the country, irrespective of caste. In this way the territory of the Merina state was redefined in terms of ancestral space—ny tany—for the whole Merina population. In the same manner that the ancestral tomb is the exclusive space of the kinship group on the local level, the city of Ambohimanga was prohibited to foreigners. Foreigners did not have ancestral relations in Merina, and were therefore not part of Merina ny tany.

Pulling together the contemporary ethnography of Bloch and the historical ethnography of Kus, the duality of the metropolis Antananarivo and the necropolis Ambohimanga emerges as a spatial symbol of the duality in Merina cosmology. The king resided alternately in the two, and thus stood forth as a symbolic mediator between the moral sphere of the ancestors and the sensual world of the living.

This combined ethnography demonstrates how space is related to cosmology—to the underlying ideas that structure symbolic constructions. Further, we see how the king managed to redefine and extend this symbolic space, by utilizing meaning taken from the same underlying cosmology. And lastly, it is revealed how taxes—an innovation implying wide economic repercussions for Merina society—were also engraved into the same symbolic system. Merina politics, economy, and the national space emerged from the process radically transformed, but the basic ideas of ancestral power and the duality of existence persist, to the dismay of missionaries and development planners. Let us now return to Gore for a moment. He proposes that geography should focus on social processes and asks how space is made relevant in those processes. I do agree with Gore that we must not abstract space and let go of our sociological catechism. But we must proceed further than his limited ambition of sociological description. If coping with space is to produce the kind of brilliant insight into social life offered by Daniel, Eyles, Bloch and Kus, we must penetrate deeper into the reality of the others than a thin description of social processes. We must dare to consider symbols as data, get at the others' representations of their own life worlds, and see how space is constructed according to cosmology. In other words, we must interpret the others' construction of space, and thereby emancipate ourselves from the strait-jacket of a finite list of spaces, derived from European philosophers. I propose to label such cultural constructs symbolic space.

Contesting spaces in the Middle East: The nation state and the Ummah

What kind of insight can we gain from using a symbolic notion of space? Let me turn briefly to the recent Gulf War, and try to demonstrate the validity of a symbolic notion of space in understanding the dramatic events of the winter of 1991.

When American and European attacks were launched on Iraq immediately after the UN deadline for withdrawal from Kuwait had expired on January 15th 1991, CNN and other television channels brought the war straight into our sheltered living rooms all over the world. Among the horrors and anxieties of those days, some of us television viewers were particularly surprised by the strong emotions the UN (i.e. Western) attacks on Iraq generated all over the Muslim world. In Amman, CNN News showed frenzied Palestinian women cursing the attack; there were anti-Western riots in
Algeria; Bangladeshis expressed their emotions in violent street demonstrations; etc. To a Westerner, those reactions did not make sense. The legitimacy of the UN actions were obvious: Iraq had violated an international border; the UN operations in Iraq were collectively decided upon by world society; and, bearing in mind the disgusting poisonous gas attacks on Kurdish villages in his own country, Saddam Hussein was the uncontested bad guy in the play.

In order to understand those furious reactions among Muslims outside Iraq, we have to look at Western and Middle Eastern constructions of space, and the application of those spaces in discourses over the Gulf War.

In the Western world, the legitimacy of the UN operation is to be found in firmly embedded conceptions of the nation state. A sovereign state, Kuwait, was violently attacked and occupied by another state, Iraq. The act immediately invoked memories of German occupations during the second world war in Europe. Saddam’s occupation of Kuwait was easily compared to Hitler’s occupation of Poland, Norway, or France. Saddam’s crime was the fact that he had violated a border which is very significant indeed in the Western mind—the border of the nation state.

People in the Middle East also perceive of national borders, and Saddam had few supporters even there. But Middle Easterners also construct space according to other principles. The idea of the Pan-Arab nation is based upon unity of all Arabic-speaking peoples, and several efforts were made to make it a political reality from 1958 to 1963 (Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq). But even more significant is the notion of al-Ummah—the Muslim community. Conceptually, the Ummah is where Muslims live. In spatial terms it comprises the area from Morocco and Mauretania in the west to Malaysia and Indonesia in the east. This religiously constructed space is very significant to Muslims—ideally more so than the national space.

According to muslim perception, then, the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was a violation of a national border, and as such it was condemnable. However, the combined American-European military operation in Iraq was a violation of the Ummah border, which was, to some muslims, a greater offence than the violation of a national one. Thus, the discursive use of two different constructions of space—that of the nation state and that of the Ummah—makes sense of the emotional reactions of the Palestinian women and of the surprise these reactions evoked in Western viewers of CNN.

Another effect of these discrepancies in symbolic space between the West and the muslim world can be envisaged in the Salman Rushdie case. Again, according to Western perception, the fatwa (death sentence) issued by the the late Ayatollah Khomeini in response to a writer who merely exercises his right freedom of speech, seems totally meaningless to us. But again, by invoking the idea of the Ummah, the fatwa becomes more understandable. To a muslim mind, the Satanic Verses is more than an abuse of a holy book; it is also treason against the Ummah! In his book, Rushdie informs non-muslims of topics that are not accepted in public muslim discourse. In that respect Rushdie should not be compared to some contemporary Western critics of Christianity, but to spies or collaborators giving away the nation state to its enemies. In some muslim eyes, Rushdie is not a Voltaire, but a Kim Philby or a Quisling!

Indeed, this is not a defence for the fatwa issued and kept up by the militant Iranian regime. The intention is to demonstrate how the awareness of different symbolic constructions of space can make sense of behaviour which is otherwise rendered irrational, or fundamentalist, or merely senseless, when we stick to only one conception of space. Conceiving of space as a symbolic construction and thereby as a variable, channels our attention to a different set of questions than does a fixed list of possible spaces.

The problem of relativism and comparison.

The notion of space as a symbolic or cultural construction leads us to a fourth epistemological question, that is recurrent in anthropology as well as in geography: the opposition between idiosyncratic, relativistic interpretation on the one hand, and comparative, theory-generating science on the other. The problem can be formulated thus: If it is as I claim, that the only way to describe spatial phenomena is to interpret empirical, cultural constructions of them, does it yield any meaning at all to undertake comparative analyses? How can we know that the things we compare are the same phenomena? Can we altogether say that the Tamil ur and the Merina ny tany belong to the category we call space? What is the same phenomenon when any observation has its own, contextually inter-
preted meaning, and when phenomenon as well as context are cultural constructions?

Dan Sperber has seen the problem inherent in relativism when he claims that an “earnest” relativist ... “should be either quite pessimistic about the possibility of doing ethnography at all, or extraordinarily optimistic about the abilities of ethnographers” (Sperber 1985, p 41). Should we restrict our ambition to idiosyncratic interpretations of the ways in which space is constructed in individual cultural contexts and leave it at that, or should we take the liberty to compare different conceptions of space, with the ultimate goal of producing general knowledge of man in society?

A tempting solution to the problem is offered by postmodernism, since it rejects the question as irrelevant. To a convinced postmodernist, any interpretation is a product of communication between an ego and an alter—conventionally labelled researcher and informant—and therefore it is a commonly evolved text. Postmodernists are neither relativists or scientists, but simply constructors of texts. According to this epistemology, Daniel does not describe the Tamil conceptualization of space in his book, but a new construction of space which is neither wholly Daniel’s nor the Tamils’. It is a product of the communication between them.

Contrary to postmodernists, Anthony Good (1982) accepts the validity of the relativism-comparative science question. His proposal is that comparison consists of two methodological steps. The researcher starts by interpreting people’s own categories, and describing how these constitute values and behaviour. She then translates the categories into an external language, and analyzes the formal categories on a high level of abstraction. The formal analysis must be on the level of systems, and not on isolated elements like kinship, or space. Bloch (ibid.) must subscribe to such a methodology when he compares the Merina ancestral tomb with Western capital.

Sperber (ibid.) goes for a similar solution when he advocates a practiced distinction between interpretative ethnography and theoretical anthropology. The relationship between them must be such that ethnography produces data for anthropological theories, and vice versa, that ethnography must be informed by anthropological theory of the kinds of data that are relevant for the common goal: to produce objective and general knowledge of man.

Geography is, of course, familiar with a similar historical distinction between idiographic, humanistic geography on the one hand, and nomothetic, theoretical geography on the other. In the same manner as suggested by Good and Sperber for anthropology, the relationship between the two geographies should also be cooperation rather than opposition—that idiosyncratic geography sets right the categories included in the theories of nomothetic geography. But for such a cooperation to materialize, some walls must first be torn down. Harvey’s three spaces is such a wall. Instead of opting for relational space as Gore (1984) does, or relative space in the manner of Duncan (1989), we should investigate the exciting cultural variations in sybolic space, and then start the laborious task of constructing theories of regional development.

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