

Federico Boni

Rob Shields, "Spatial Questions. Cultural Topologies and Social Spatialisations". Los Angeles, London: Sage, 2013, 216 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/80404)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Rob Shields, *Spatial Questions. Cultural Topologies and Social Spatialisations*. Los Angeles, London: Routledge, 2013, 216 pp.

doi: 10.2383/80404

In the last decades a “spatial turn” has made its way across the social sciences, cultural studies and humanities. This turn can be understood as part of the main idea of producing a material thinking that has occupied social theory over the last years. To be sure, this turn in human geography has been heralded by an early focus on topography, a central theoretical and methodological tool for critical human geographers. Topography has been used to conceptualize the production of localities and spaces in relation to site-specific and broad social and cultural processes. The tool allows the understanding of a sense of place amidst a larger geography of flows and networks.

Over the past decades, however, critical human geography has centered its inquiry on the production of a material sense of place through a fairly different concept, that of topology – a concept that allows for a non-planar, non-linear, non-territorial, and non-distance based account of (the production of) space and place. This shift from topography to topology is consistent with the “spatial turn”, as both these theoretical and methodological approaches consider the different ways in which space makes a (social and cultural) difference. By postulating that everything is spatially distributed, that there is no such thing as a boundary (all spaces are porous), that every space is in constant motion and that there is no one kind of space, human geographers and social scientists understand space not as a void but as a qualitative context framing different behaviors and situating different actions and conflicts.

Rob Shields’ book contributes to a conceptualization of topology framing it within the socio-cultural field. According to Shields, his book is “a work of thresholds, edges and folds: a topology in many senses – it explores spatial distinctions and boundaries established by markers such as a doorway, as well as less tangible distinctions such as near and far or cultural divisions between social fields” [p. xi.] That is, the book itself can be read in a topological way. If read in a linear – more traditional – way, the book provides a dense overview of the main contributions to Western spatial thought, showing that there has been no consistent historical consensus on the nature of space, and that statements of the “problem of space” by philosophers and mathematicians have marked out entire epochs in the treatment of space and place.

The book is structured in six chapters. The first four chapters set the historical and theoretical frameworks of the concepts of “cultural topology” and “social spatialisation.” Shields advocates a critical “cultural topology” that can be understood as “a critical theory and method for social science and geography by considering the recurrent quality of orders of spacing and placing” [p. 1] – what he calls “spatialisations.” Shields’ topology is far more than a physical geographic reference – it is (it can be) a metaphor. Shields draws from the theoretical standpoints of such authors as Lefebvre (“his thesis is that ‘space’ is a collectively produced or elaborated ‘social space,’ which is better understood as a social spatialisation” [p. 20],) Goffman, Bourdieu, and of course Foucault’s and Deleuze’s concepts of “diagram” – a very important concept for (cultural) topology. After all, one

of the most famous diagrams for social and cultural studies is the Panopticon, which “was originally an architectural model,” which became “a political technology” [p. 130.]

In fact, diagrams are used in architectural studies concerned with the problem of space and power, assuming that the space around buildings and within them is a continuous and structured entity (which allows strangers to move around but only to admit into buildings two categories of people, inhabitants and visitors – the spaces of the building interface the two categories of people and exclude strangers). Society is organized in a way which can be described in the abstract but which, in the material world, is framed by space. There is no a-spatial society, and no a-social space. Diagrams in architecture control interfaces between people, and between them and spaces. In space, relations of power are always present and active.

Thus, focusing on diagrams allows for a recognition of the power of place in the constitution, description regulation of society. This concept offers scope for geographers and cultural analysts to study senses of place and the power relations they imply. The main idea is that spatialisation unifies the discursive (the use of metaphors) and empirical (the social and cultural practices), and indicates their inter-relations. Spatialisation can be seen as operating as a Foucauldian dispositif.

In the last two chapters of the book, Shields provides a theoretical framework for what he calls a “topological turn,” built upon the “spatial turn.” Actually, what he is advocating for might be called a kind of “topological imagination,” or better a “topological sensibility” which could “provide the rules of connection from the local neighborhood to an overall system” [p. 155.] Although we can share Shields’ enthusiasm for the potential of a “topological sensibility,” the very idea of a new “turn,” that of topology, is much more questionable. What does it mean to think in terms of a “turn?” What does this metaphor imply? A turn can be many things: it can be a move towards or away from something, a new departure or a revisiting (a “reboot”). When scholars advocate for a “turn” they tend to indicate a foregrounding of an aspect hitherto ignored or underrated (such as the role of language in the linguistic turn, or that of materiality in the material turn). The problem with this claim is that the potentially inclusive and expansive effect is obscured by the implication of exclusivity: instead of looking at the highlighted aspect, it may become a looking exclusively at this aspect, thus ignoring the starting point or other related aspects. It doesn’t seem much of a novelty in scholarly research to think in terms of a “topological turn,” especially when it moves away from the previous “spatial turn.” If the claim is that topology can be seen as both material and metaphorical, then we can assume that “spatial turn” includes both material and metaphorical aspects, thus making the proposal of a new turn quite unnecessary and even confusing.

We can share Shields’ enthusiasm for the idea of a “topological sensibility” – or what could be more understandable as a “topological imagination” –, but a new turn based on topology seems to be almost a redundant repetition of what human geography and social sciences already can dispose of. Moreover, the very idea of a “spatial turn” includes the characteristics Shields attributes to his “topological turn” – after all, the “spatial turn” may be read not only as a turn to the spatial, but also as a spatialisation of the turn, with its departure from defined starting points, notions of linear progress, and fixed (or already known) destinations. In this sense, spatial thinking is already a topological thinking, a kind of topological imagination.

Nevertheless, *Spatial Questions* can be considered one of the most complete accounts in the recent literature about topology and spatialisation. The first part may be too dense, to the detriment of a full understanding of the main argument of the book. But it is a welcome contribution to spatial theory (if not to a “topological turn” tout court), allowing for a new and fresh understanding of “spacing” and the spatialisations that are accomplished through everyday activities, representations and conflicts.

Federico Boni
University of Milan