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# On the Spatial Re-Figuration of the Social World

by Hubert Knoblauch *and* Martina Löw

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## 1. Introduction

It is hardly possible to ignore the fact that we are witnessing various forms of acceleration of social life [Rosa 2015]. We know that people speak faster and more, sleep less and adapt quicker to new technologies [Eriksen 2001]. According to Rosa [2015], temporal structures have become more dynamic due to modern systems of legal regulation, social welfare with their bureaucratic apparatuses, formalized education paths as well as insurance and pension systems. Later, the decline of linear conceptions of history, the reduction of welfare systems and post-Fordist work organization are among the many factors leading to new time structures. Although it would be possible to detect similar increases of complexity in terms of national territorial organization, globalization and mediatization, the social constitution of space has not received the same amount of attention as the temporal order. This may be due to the fact that the project of a sociology of space is still underdeveloped [Fuller and Löw 2017]. Although Simmel [1992 (orig. 1903)] as well as Durkheim [1965 (orig. 1912)] already addressed space as a social phenomenon [Zieleniec 2007], only few authors have continued to develop the project of a sociology of space, for example Lefebvre [1974] and Jean Rémy [1975]. Both, Lefebvre and Rémy, played a fundamental role in reconstituting space as essential to understand capitalism and society. It was only some twenty-five years ago that we started to witness what has come to be called the “spatial turn” [Soja 1989; Löw 2001] or the “topographical” or “topological turn”

[Weigel 2002; Schlögel 2003; Döring/Thielmann 2008]. Space ceased to be regarded simply as the environment of society marked by bounded territories and defined by the code of “here” and “there”; the turn takes space to be a relational category based in social interaction and interdependency.

Inspired by this turn we have seen a flourishing of social studies which aim to understand societal dynamics in terms of space and orders of space. Despite the proliferation of studies, space remains a category rarely reflected in sociological theory [Frehse 2013; Löw and Steets 2014]; rather, it seems to be assumed that space is a matter for special fields such as the sociology of architecture or urban sociology, while society as a whole may be understood without any reference to space. There are only few studies reflecting the spatial structures of their subject matter to be found in sociological journals. In other words, spaces are seen as social, but sociality is not seen as spatial. There are, undoubtedly, some excellent studies on particular spatial phenomena of basic social categories, such as social inequality [Lobao, Hooks and Tickamyer 2007]. In general, however, it has to be admitted that sociology, after the first wave of the spatial turn, is now only slowly starting to get a more precise idea of how to grasp space in a non-substantialist way.

This lack of research on space in social theory becomes particularly obvious in view of the massive transformation that we have been witnessing in the last decades. In fact, there are many indications that the spatial organization of sociality is changing. But we lack adequate concepts for this so that our grasp of these changes remains vague, such as Castells’s [1996] idea of the network society, Mol and Law’s [1994] idea of fluid spaces, Deleuze and Guattari’s [1988] concept of “nodes” or Appadurai’s notion of scapes [1996]. It seems all the more important to address these changes inasmuch as many authors in the 1980s and 1990s simply assumed that space will be lose its relevance tout court [Jamesons 1984; Virilio 1986 and 2000; Serres 1991]. Today, there is evidence pointing in the opposite direction towards a “spacing out,” a process of generating and extending spaces [Simone 2011, 363; Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008]. However, research has not adjusted to this increased relevance of spaces. The basic categories as proposed by, for example, Jessop, Brenner and Jones [2008], including territory, place, scale and network, lack all theoretical foundation and systematic elaboration between the categories. As a result, despite the many publications on space and society in the last twenty years, many critics bemoan the lack of continuation, elaboration and specification of spatial theory of sociality in the last decade, which for its part is perceived to be “under-theorized” [Massey 2005; Hubbard and Kitchin 2011, 7; Shields 2013, 1]. Jureit [2012] rightly criticizes that many studies appeal to a relational notion of space only rhetorically, and Malpas [2012] also argues that categories of space and space imagination are only

used rhetorically, but not theoretically reflected. The lack of an elaborated theory of space is also felt from the perspective of empirical methods so that many methodological problems are left open [Baur *et al.* 2014]. Therefore, in this paper we would like to address the question already explicitly posed by Lefebvre as to how “espace” and “spacialité” contribute to the constitution of societal order [Lefebvre 2000 (orig. 1974)]. In order to do so, we shall sketch some ideas concerning the spatial transformation of contemporary society, which we summarize under the title of re-figuration.

Re-figuration is for us a preliminary general hypothesis which helps to understand what we perceive as a fundamental shift in our understanding of space. In order to specify what we mean by re-figuration, we shall consider three processes related to it: Mediatization seems to us to be a dynamic driving force of the re-figuration of space by way of digitalization. It is one of the reasons for another new spatial development that could be called translocalization. By translocal we mean that social units such as families or religious communities have different locations that are connected by the circulation of knowledge, representations and things. Thirdly, we shall consider the changing relations of spaces as social contexts of different activities, forms of communication and societal functions; we call this “polycontexturalization.” Since we consider these aspects as hypothetical, we shall sketch these categories in a preliminary way, allowing for additions and corrections by empirical studies. The specification remains the task of an empirical research program devoted to re-figuration.

Re-figuration not only addresses general societal changes; it also demands that we continue the reflection on what we mean by space and how we can conceive the sociality of space, which was so inspiring in the spatial turn towards a relational understanding of space. Therefore, we shall begin with some general reflections on space and communicative action before we turn to a more specific elaboration of re-figuration.

### 1.1. *Relational Space and Communicative Action*

The foundational role of the body for the constitution of space has been stressed from Kant [1968, 38; with respect to the “regions in space”, such as “above and below”, “right and left”, “front and back”] up to Lefebvre, whose spatial practices incorporate gestures, bodily movements and behaviours and their reference to physical and social space. Lefebvre links subjectivist approaches to space with materialist and objectivist approaches. Building on the structuration theory of Giddens, we have suggested a relational theory of space [Löw 2001; 2008]. In this view, space is founded on an operation of placement of objects in places (spacing), and secondly

operations of conceptual synthesis and making sense of the relational significance of this spacing in this space. By means of the notion of assemblage (spaces as relational arrangements of social goods and living beings in places) we stress that figurations are based both on the active practice as well as on the accomplishment of synthesizing. Spaces therefore are always structured in a dynamic way. This dynamic structure precedes action just as much as it is the result of action. This ongoing process is dynamic and a situational developing order by means of the rules inscribed in the structures and by the material and bodily resources used to stabilize the spatialization [Löw 2008]. It is clear that the sensual modality of subjective perception, the kind of bodily performance and the materiality and form of spatial objectivations may vary massively; moreover, subjects can remember experiences, reproduce them as knowledge and construe them as imagination; on the other hand, objectivations ordered in space can affect subjects in various sensual ways, create atmospheres and acquire meaning in such a way as to become part of assembled orders of signs (such as maps), of technologies (such as CAD) or objects, such as built architecture.

In order to explain the sociality of space it does not suffice, of course, to assume the duality of individual actions (and routines derived from them) and structures; neither would it be satisfying to assume sociality because actors derive their knowledge of spaces from other persons and their cultural objectivations (such as language, objects, visualizations). We shall therefore indicate how the idea of relationality can be linked with a basic concept of sociality by drawing on a theoretical approach which is currently developing under the title of communicative constructivism [Knoblauch 2013; 2016].

The sociality of space seems to us a feature of all social relations between subjects. Subjects are related to one another not only by action and its meaning; we assume, rather, that from the very beginning actors are embodied in such a way as not only to be able to address other actors as actors but also so as to be reciprocally perceived by other actors. Actions, therefore, are bodily performances, which make perceivable, observable, accountable what makes sense to others [Garfinkel 1967]. What is sensually “perceivable” is what we call objectivation. Whether it is embodied or objectified, it turns any action into a communicative action.<sup>1</sup> We prefer this notion to “communication” as it implies a (non-essential) form of subjectivity applied to situations of solitary action. And finally, this notion of communicative action exhibits a basic spatiality as an essential part of its sociality.

<sup>1</sup> In this view, the notion of communicative action differs from Habermas’ concept in that it does not follow his categoric distinction to instrumental action, refers to embodied social actions and considers also objectivations which are not linguistic. The notion is elaborated in Knoblauch [2017].

The role of space as a basic feature of sociality was already indicated by Schutz [1962] in his idea of reciprocity. Reciprocity includes what he called the interchangeability of standpoints. This means that actors not only “take the role of the other” but must also relate to the zero point of the other. This relation also implies one’s own subjective “zero point” of the coordinate system. In addition, it also must take into account the very position of the other. This can be best illustrated with respect to the basic gesture of pointing: When pointing with one’s finger, one relates to one’s own bodily position and, simultaneously, to the position of the other’s body and assumed perception. As Hanks [1996] stressed, pointing is essentially relational [Hanks 1996]; moreover, the recent discussion of pointing by Tomasello [2008] has demonstrated that the signification of the pointing gesture has an ontogenetic basis (it occurs after the nine-month revolution and is one of its decisive steps) and a phylogenetic basis (it is a feat achieved only by humans). Finally, the gesture of pointing demonstrates how even parts of the body such as the finger can be used as objectified signs opening up the space not only between subjects but also between objects referred to, references and, finally, representations.

Although the consequences of the communicative approach to the theory of space based on Giddens’s theory of structuration still needs to be elaborated, we share the view that spaces can be conceived as relational arrangements of embodied actors locating and being located by other bodies, objects and technologies. Spatial assemblages consist of material and symbolic relations of interdependence between human beings and objects. They can take on many different forms, such as networks or territories. They are formed on different scales (such as the place or cosmic space), and they can integrate the distant into the proximate (for example, cosmic space represented on a screen or an urban space). Spaces can be objectified solidly by walls or they can be constituted by mobile chains, things and humans moving between locations, such as markets or paths. Assemblages share the relationality between human subjects and objects. Spaces have an objectified – material – as well as a symbolic and subjective meaning. They are subjectively synthesized by subjects in their synthesis of sensual, affective and conscious aspects; on the other hand they are produced by the spacings, i.e. the locating of bodies and objects with their different demands on synthesis. They are basically social assemblages inasmuch as the active relation in space is always a social relation of communicative action, and inasmuch as the subjective experience of space and its synthesis is dependent on socially communicated spatial knowledge, on representations and signs. Spatial relations, therefore, are always social relations, and as communicative actions always affect social reality by means of objectifications, so that spatial relations are always social relations of power.

On the basis of the particular power relations certain assemblages become dominant in societies, for example territories (be they camps, colonies, zones or nation states). For the same reason they can be complemented or opposed by contrasting assemblages, such as classes, networks, clouds. The various spatial relations (concurrency, cooperation or conflict) of such relational assemblages and their overall spatial order (as Elias called it, the “figuration of figurations”) may be called the spatial figuration of a society.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of figuration makes it possible to address spatial relations of any order and across different scales. Yet it retains some basic spatial categories such as place, locality and space [Couldry and Hepp 2016, 85ff.]. Place is an important category subsumed under the general notion of space. If we consider a formation as a place, often designating it by a unifying name, we refer to strategies of communicative action which bestow an identity and contribute to a social order. This is also done by tradition, memories, common experiences, visual or linguistic representations, stories and other communicative genres; and, of course, objects, signs and other objectifications are placed so that they structure locations. While we can compare places to a “gathering” [Malpas 2006], we refer to space as the link between different objects and bodies, each with its own location. We cannot conceive of the construction of space without the production of places, while places are but one dimension in the interweaving of global, national and regional dimensions [Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008; Landzelius 2009].

Having sketched a basic notion of a social theory of space, we shall now approach the question of the recent changes of the spatial order. As this question is rarely addressed, we shall argue that the results of a huge quantity of spatial studies (some of which shall only be referred to here) can be interpreted in terms of the spatial re-figuration of society. The thesis implies a decisive shift from what has been referred to as modern society and the spatial process of globalization. In the following part we shall try to highlight this shift to re-figuration by underlining the differences of modern society and globalization before we qualify what we mean by re-figuration in terms of polycontexturalization, mediatization and translocalization.

## **2. From Modernity and Globalization to the Re-Figuration of Space**

Modernity has been claimed to affect the social organization of space. Research on early modernity in Western societies has demonstrated that territories have be-

<sup>2</sup> For an elaborate discussion of the notion of figuration with respect to communication media cf. Couldry and Hepp [2016].

come the dominant form of spatial organization. Although older models (such as the idea of the empire with its loosely defined territory and boundaries [Münkler 2005]) still persist, between the Sixteenth and the Eighteenth century three strategies of marking territory have been most salient [Landwehr 2007; Gugerli and Speich 2002]: topographical measurement, statistical and cartographic registration and the idea that territoriality can be produced by the state [e.g. Jureit 2012, 22; Raffestin 1980; Osterhammel 2000; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Günzel and Nowak 2012].<sup>3</sup> The Western model of space established by these strategies was already transferred to other cultural areas in the Nineteenth century. This transfer has been conceptualized in various ways. While Randeria [2000] argues that the strategies themselves were embedded in a prior cultural transfer to the “entangled” West, the theory of world culture [Meyer 2005] assumes that Western models follow a distinct logic of rationality that is so to speak copied into other societies in such a way as to adapt the model of the territorial state. Eisenstadt, on the other hand, assumes that different cultural areas follow different paths of rationalization resulting in “Multiple Modernities” [Eisenstadt 2002]: cultures transform the logic the modern state, modern economy, science etc. when they adapt the forms. As diverse as the concept of modern territory may be, it is obvious that it has become the dominant form of large-scale spatial organization in the Twentieth century. The huge variety of structures of power has been increasingly centralized within territories, most clearly expressed in the state monopoly on violence [Elias 1976 (orig. 1939)]. Charles S. Maier [2000] therefore declared territoriality to be the key to an understanding of the last century.

The monopoly on violence and the consequent extension of boundaries and people within territories contributed to the enforcement of state territories and the homogenization of spaces, including homogenous spatial areas, such as playing grounds, pedestrian zones, recreation areas or border installations [Harvey 1991, 155; Harvey 1982]. The marking off of space allowed for the construction of spatial units which increasingly came to be understood as “containers” on the collective level (containing a “nation”) as well as on the individual level (container as a metaphor for spatial knowledge).

The idea of space as container goes back to classical antiquity. It was elaborated to the idea of absolute space by Newton in the Seventeenth century [1988, 44 (orig. 1687)]. In the course of the Nineteenth and Twentieth century it became connected to concepts of colonies, “lebensraum” and large cultural areas [Jureit 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Cartography became the main medium of spatial representation, entering successively into everyday spatial representation, orientations and perceptions [Mignolo 2000; Shields 2013, 64].



It was disseminated as the general metaphor for space and as a at times ruthless ideological core for the violent expansion of power [Muchow and Muchow 1935; Piaget and Inhelder 1975 (orig. 1947)]. Even scientific research on space was significantly influenced by this idea simply by the fact that it selected, defined and studied space as if it could be simply subdivided into the parts it contains [Löw 2001, 63ff.].

This model of modernity is, however, an idealization; therefore, we can find a series of tendencies counter to the modern concept of space as a container and its enforcement. In mathematics new concepts of space made a breakthrough thanks to the formulation of the theory of relativity in physics. Moreover, in the art forms of Cubism and Expressionism, in Theatre of the Absurd and in Dadaist literature a relational conception of space was articulated [Giedion 1941]. The modern city evolved to become something of the spatial counterpart of national territory as functional structures dissolved into a heterogeneous ensemble without clear-cut boundaries. The massive growth of the economy, economic cooperation and interdependence not only strengthened the state but also inserted it into an increasingly global economy [Conrad 2010] which is characterized by “regimes of territoriality”, that is “changing relations between nation, state, population, infrastructure, territory and global order.”

Although modernization theories represent a Western view of societal transformation, they make it possible to analytically highlight these societal and spatial changes in the globalization process. Historians such as Charles S. Maier [2000] take globalization to be a process that started in the Sixteenth century, and identify a shift starting in the 1970s. Thus, according to Osterhammel [2000], we have been witnessing a different mode of globalization since the 1970s. According to Osterhammel, this shift is caused by new media, the intensification of transnational cooperation in the political and economic sphere, and, of course, the re-ordering of the political system after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, which ended the “short” Twentieth century. We take the societal processes since the 1970s to be part of the spatial re-figuration of the social order, including the increasing dominance of capitalistic economies, neoliberalism and the consequent retreat of the social welfare state.

Indications of this re-figuration are changes in the economy and the development of communicative capitalism [Dean 2005], the massive deindustrialization of Western societies, the transfer of advanced industries to other areas of the world and the reduction of the industrial workforce due to substitution by automatized, digitalized and increasingly roboterized production agents. These processes are related to new forms of circulation of goods [Peiker *et al.* 2011], and the new role of theoretical

knowledge and communication systems in the production process [Bell 1973]. Therefore, the principle of centrality, hierarchical order and territoriality cedes to translocal work organization, network structures and decentrality [Willke 2001; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999]; this is expressed in particular in the increasing domination of multinational companies [Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989; Lash and Urry 1994; Barry 2006], an increase in international interactions and networked production chains [Bathelt, Malmberg and Maskell 2004]. They can no longer be understood in terms of “spatially nested hierarchies” [Lüthi, Thierstein and Bentlage 2013, 284ff.], but rather must be understood as networks overlapping spatial scales while concentrating organizational principles in enterprises [*Ibidem*, 291].

The substitution of the paramount status of politics by the economy has been considered to be one major move towards what has been called “late modernity” [Giddens 1990]. Late modernity, Giddens argues, is characterized by a disembedding of time and space. While space used to be linked to a place and a body, access to other spaces is no longer limited by the location of one’s body. The rupture of modernity has also been linked with the diagnosis of postmodernity [Bauman 1997] and the “second”, “reflexive modernity” [Beck and Bonß 2001] or even “late modernity”, as Giddens puts it [1990]. Both changes are often linked to transformations in knowledge and culture, such as the emancipatory social movements since the Vietnam War protests and the end of the grand narrative of modernization and rationalization. Social movements contribute to the re-figuration of space, e.g. by virtue of the romantic re-evaluation of the countryside, pre-war housing and the political interpretation of private spaces (“nuclear free front yard”) [Schregel 2011]. Feminism, gay and other movements have been deconstructing the ideas of homogenous populations as the “content” of territories [Mol and Law 1994]. The 1970s also marked the crisis of modern urban planning, which turned to the plurality and particularities of urban life forms [Noller and Ronneberger 1995, 40; Doering-Manteuffel 2007]. The exportation of Western models of democracy is confronted with the increasing problem of “governance in unbounded spaces” [Kohler-Koch 1998]: transnational networks of experts and activists are increasingly defining local problems, demanding and setting standards [Haas 1992; Lidskog and Sundqvist 2002; Djelic, Sahlin and Andersson 2006; Djelic and Quack 2012]. Transnational systems of review und benchmarking compare spaces with respect to “good governance” [Power 1999; Bruno 2009], and epistemic authority substitutes democratic legitimacy. Simultaneously, political groups and social movements are becoming more influential and transnationally dynamic by virtue of new communication technologies [Van De Donk *et al.* 2004; Chadwick 2006; Coleman and Blumer 2009; Hajer 2010]. Interestingly, the extension of the network society results in small-scale

local fragmentations, territorializations and individualized public space, while new forms of space become independent of territories, such as infrastructural zones [Barry 2006].

Although the notion of globalization is applied to earlier periods in a different meaning, since the 1970s it is also applied to the massive process of transnationalization [Mau 2007]. The extension of political, economic and other spheres beyond the boundary of national territories has been understood in systems theory as world society [Luhmann 1997; Stichweh 2000], while Appadurai [1996] grasped the global extension of functional spheres in his notion of scapes, i.e. globalized deterritorialized cultural areas following their own logics. According to Appadurai [1996], the decoupling of culture and place yields five “scapes”, namely ethnoscares, technoscares, financescares, mediascares and ideoscares.

As these concepts mostly assume a break or rupture with respect to space, we suggest the notion of re-figuration to address these changes. In using the concept of re-figuration we draw on Elias’s notion of figuration. Elias characterized societies in general with reference to the figurations constituted by the relations of interdependence between actors; in his studies on the history of Western civilization he characterized modern society with regard to a centralized structure based on the state monopoly on violence. The centralized figuration is linked to a concept of a national territory that is administered by the state.

Inasmuch as figuration is framed as a processual term, we understand figuration as a single pattern that can be subject to subsequent transformations or re-figurations. As Hepp and Couldry [2016] argue, it is particularly the changes of figurations, the mediatization of communicative action through information and communication technologies, infrastructures and corresponding networks of relations and power, which lead to transformation. Based on the mediatization of communicative action, the increased circulation of people and things, we assume a tendency towards a more networked form of figuration as outlined by Castells [1996]. However, instead of assuming an “interregnum” between two figurations or structures, the notion of re-figuration underlines the process which results from the contact, tension and conflict between these figurations. On the one hand, we detect a tendency towards flat, networked and egalitarian social relations, institutions and institutional orders with the opening and transgression of spaces, the transcending of spatial scales and the translocalization of identities, communities and collectivities by communication, tourism, commerce, migration etc. On the other hand we are witnessing a tendency towards a reassertion of modern spatiality by stressing local, regional or national borders and national identities. It is with respect to this tension and conflict that we can explain the re-figuration of power in local settings (e.g. urban spaces), in national

settings (i.e. borders) and even in transnational relation (as in the EU, in Islam and Islamism, in TTIP). Instead of assuming a move from a modern order to a late modern, ultramodern or postmodern order, re-figuration makes it possible to grasp the meandering resulting from these kinds of conflicts, tensions and contacts.<sup>4</sup>

As opposed to the notion of transformation, re-figuration refers to the relation of interdependence; it is, therefore, explicitly relational in a way that does not separate different levels a priori, such as “macro”, “meso” and “micro”. Re-figuration is not only an institutional phenomenon (sociogenesis) but also affects subjects themselves (psychogenesis). In conceiving of re-figuration as a process, Elias puts the focus on the “how” of the transformation. It is our understanding that the question as to “how” is answered by focusing on communicative action. It is by way of the objectivation of actions that subjects construct not only their interrelations but also their social reality, and due to the embodied and performative character of these actions, they are constitutive of space. As space is not just an accidental aspect but a basic feature of sociality, spatiality is central to the analysis of re-figuration. In fact, we take space to be the major form in which we can observe the re-figuration of contemporary societies.

### **3. Polycontexturalization, Mediatization and Translocalization**

For obvious reasons re-figuration is a very abstract notion referring to many different processes. In order to specify the main dimensions of the fundamental social changes, let us sketch three processes which contribute to the re-figuration of space. To be more exact, we shall formulate three hypotheses as to what processes constitute the re-figuration of space, and elaborate them below.

The first hypothesis concerns changing relations of bounded social spaces as social contexts of communicative actions. Consequently the constitution of spaces is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and spatial synthesis is multiplying. We designate these processes with the term polycontexturalization. This notion was suggested by Luhmann [1997, 36] in order to address the problem that modern societies cannot be described in terms of neat and clear-cut functional differentiation. To the degree that functional requirements lose their distinctness, communication is polyvalent and follows different codes at the same time. For this reason, polycontexturality refers to multiple references of communication to different subsystems (a phenomenon that in 2001 Thévenot described as pragmatic regimes). In this context, we want to underline the spatial character of polycontexturalization which leads to the nesting of

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed elaboration of the re-figuration cf. Knoblauch [2017, 381ff.]

communicative actions. In addition to the mediation of different locations in translocalization, and the mediatization of communicative actions by digital technologies, polycontexturalization means that different institutional orders or frames occur simultaneously at one location. As an example, we may refer to Massey's [1993, 155ff.] analysis of Kilburn High Road in London. As Massey shows, being, walking or shopping there is not only local but is embedded in global economies, transnational relations between locals and visitors as well as their languages, religions and consumer cultures. Polycontexturalization is also materialized in a medical consultation when the practitioner refers simultaneously to a medical, an economic and a religious or ethical frame [Knudsen and Vogd 2015]. Another example for polycontexturalization can be seen in the diverse spatial and social contexts integrated in Smart Cities and located in their coordination centres: Travellers can be oriented simultaneously to information on diverse traffic systems – ranging from walking to public traffic systems and privately shared cars – as well as to safety problems in various urban areas, and big data on traffic congestion and air pollution based on the movements of the travellers themselves. As communication is not reduced to meaning, but includes the bodies and their spaces, polycontexturality cannot be reduced to references of meaning only, as Luhmann suggests. Polycontexturalization is a process implying bodies, things and meaning, thus affecting space. Parallel to the acceleration of temporal structures, polycontexturalization means the simultaneous relevance of different spatial scales, dimensions and levels. Polycontexturalization implies that we do not expect the mere dissolution of territorial and homogenizing spatial logics. While the various social systems and modern structures, such as nation states, may still affect spatial orders, new media and forms of circulation create new networks, knots and power centres interfering with them and contributing to the re-figuration of space in a way which includes tension, conflict and violence on different spatial scales simultaneously (as the new forms of terrorism show).

The second hypothesis concerns the role of the new forms of media communication. There is much more empirical research to be found on this aspect of polycontexturalization, mostly under the label of “mediatization”. To the extent that communicative action is being transformed by new technical media, spaces are refigured in a way we will refer to as mediatization. The term mediatization relates to the ways in which communicative action is transmitted bodily (i.e. its modality) or by means of other objects and technologies. For example, mediatization by means of writing on paper, phoning someone or watching television affects not only the forms of bodily interaction between those present, but the institutions of societies and thus their “spatial order”. In this sense, mediatization is a mega-process linked to the basic order and transformation of societies [Krotz 2001]. The re-figuration of space we

are observing is connected to a specific form of mediatization unfolding in recent decades. This kind of mediatization is related to the new information and communication technologies already mentioned. As opposed to the classical mass media, these digitalized forms of communication make not only many-to-many communication possible; they also make an enormous quantity, frequency and density of one-to-one and one-to-many interactive communication possible [Hepp and Couldry 2016].

Castells [2009] refers to this as “mass self-communication” since the content of many of these forms is not dependent on hierarchically organized formal organizations, such as radio or television stations, which for their part are linked to and differentiated from other formal institutions, such as the state or the church. Castells assumes that this mediatization supports the tendency towards a “network society”. Next to intensifying mediated interactions, the new form of mediatization makes massively increased interactivities possible, i.e. the spatially distributed interaction between human actors and technologies [Rammert 2007]. This way, mediatization provides for new potentials and new contexts for action. In particular, the dissemination first of the personal computer, of the mobile phone and the smart phone had strong effects on space since they permit the de- and re-contextualization of situations, as well as on the mobility and circulation of people and objects. Mediatization does not only affect interpersonal interaction; rather, it is also an institutional process which refigures spaces far beyond the “media system”: it produces new forms of “communication work” including the methods of industrial production, the dissociation of classical formal organization and the move towards network, circulatory and transnational forms of institutional cooperation [Sauer and Altmann 1989; Schmidt 1990; Bechtle 1994]. The increasing speed, volatility and reach contribute to “communicative deterritorialization” [Hepp 2013]. The role of mediatization for the re-figuration of space is due to the insertion of the digitalized, interactive and smart intra-active communication technologies into chains of action; it also depends on the construction and standardization of huge infrastructures of communication technologies; although the “information gap” demonstrates sharp asymmetries on a global scale, the ongoing expansion of infrastructures is one basic driving force for the mediatization of communicative action.

Mediatization means that new media and technologies are inserted into the performance of communicative actions, such as computers, mobile phones and cars. This way, not only the structure of action is being transformed, but also the kinds of relations established by action as well as the spaces created by them. Mediatization is linked to the virtualization of spaces in such a way that actors may be located simultaneously in interactively shared spaces as well as in virtual spaces [Esposito 1995]; as a feature of communicative actions, it is also linked to subjective experiences, emotions

and imaginations which refigure what is meant by absence and presence, also making an intensification of local experiences possible [Schroer 2006]. Mediatization overcomes the distinction that used to exist between immediate, mediated and societal contexts [Knoblauch 2001]. It links what used to be immediacy with the mediated communication not only in the one-sided manner of the mass media; and it opens ways for interactively affecting “absent” objects and subjects in a physical way.

Re-figuration thus concerns the forms of appropriation of spatial knowledge, subjective orientation in space and identities. Thus, space which has been experienced as homogenous in early socialization [Muchowand Muchow 1935; Pfeil 1965] is increasingly becoming insular [Zeihner and Zeihner 1994; Schulze 1994; Reutlinger 2004, 122]. This insularization of subjective orientations in space is paralleled by new forms of orientation in space. Maps are substituted by navigation systems, and the “smartization” of spatial practices complements modern forms of localization [Foucault 1965; 1977] with new forms of governance and governing by big data and algorithms (by Amazon or Smart Cities) [Baur 2009]. Mediatization thus even concerns the large-scale projects in spatial productions: masterplans are substituted by participatory processes and multi-level governance. Mediatization also affects the forms of knowledge communication on space which are institutionalized in primary and secondary education (e.g. smart boards), in scientific discourses (PowerPoint) and in the arts (as e.g. video installations nicely show).

The process of mediatization, particularly the digitalization and intra-activation of communicative action, affects the ways in which actions are connected spatially (and, of course, temporally). It is also related to the process generally called globalization, the extension of space on a global scale. The notion of globalization, however, implies a reference to scales (local, regional, national, global) which suggest a distinct and fixed spatial order and an increasing relevance according to size (i.e. the increasing relevance of globality). Since we no longer want to take it for granted that spaces are systems of ordering in a linear way, we propose the notion of translocalization.

Our third hypothesis is that today we are faced with a process called translocalization. Translocality here refers to the embedment of social units, such as families, neighbourhoods and religious communities, into circulations linking their different locations. Circulation means mobility based on the expansion, intensification and integration of different infrastructures. It makes it possible to relate the specific location of institutions, networks and individuals with other locations. As the embedment is not taken for granted any more, it leads to an increasingly conscious reference to location. Being less taken for granted and being related with one another in more

complex ways, locations tend to become more frequently subject to conflicts between individuals, networks and organizations.

The notion of embedment differs from Giddens's analysis of disembedment as typical for the globalization process of the 1990s, i.e. "the lifting out of social relationships from local contexts and their recombination across indefinite time/space distances" [Giddens 1991, 242]. Therefore we prefer translocalization to globalization. First, globalization is a historical process, while translocalization has only become dominant in the last decades. Secondly, globalization implies an implicit reference to scales, which are considered as distinct and vertical. Third, it designates that and how locations are related to other locations simultaneously. The world no longer appears to be characterized by here and there, close and far, local and global [Schmitz 2007]; rather, it is local and not local at the same time. If locations are connected in such a way to other locations, we speak of translocality. A most pertinent example can be seen in what Knorr-Cetina [2009] calls a "synthetic situation". While classical theories assume that social situations are characterized by the "presence" of bodies, digitalized technologies and "scopic media" make it possible to link the locations of various actors, sometimes a larger number of actors. Thus, work in stock exchanges or other financial brokerages is characterized by the virtual presence of others who are at different locations, yet simultaneously act in "response presence" to one another so as to cooperatively produce social reality in a very consequential way. Another example would be dialogical navigation systems accessible while driving or information on the locations of persons during mobile communication permitting co-localization as the crucial feature for the establishment of social and bodily proximity [Licoppe and Inada 2006; Arminen and Weilenmann 2009]. They are often linked to systems of "augmented reality" making it possible to extend the bodily perceived spatial environment by means of computer-generated objects, thus synthesizing virtual and real spaces [Azuma *et al.* 2001, 34]. Synthetic situations must not be based on the immediate bodily environment but are characterized by the insertion of digital interactive media and their representations into an embodied communicative action [Kunz and Pfadenhauer 2014] by means of new forms of "connected presence" [Licoppe 2004, 135ff.].

Translocalization is not just an effect of digitalized communication technologies, but also related to the circulation of humans, things and objects. Thus, Beck [2002] considers global warming a translocal phenomenon since we always produce consequences locally for other locations. It is in this sense of global relatedness to other locations that the notion of translocality has been used, for example in connection with transnationalism [Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013, 373]. Moreover, with respect to the circulation of human beings, translocality designates the social relations



between people that span nations as well as global and local regions. This re-figuration of social relations must not be evaluated as a form of de-traditionalization, deracination or loss of communitarian structures and mental mappings [Jameson 1984]. Rather, translocalization involves the creation of new spaces by means of the intensification of transnational mobility, e.g. by the extension of migration [Faist 2000]; this, we assume, increases the relationality of locations and makes new, more selective and reflexive forms of belonging to locations possible [Watt 2009]. As new media make it possible to maintain communication and to transfer money and political participation, we are witnessing the development of new practices of “translocal subjectivity” [Conradson and McKay 2007], translocal horizons of meaning [Hepp 2013] and “translocal assemblages” [McFarlane 2011].

#### **4. Conclusion: The Re-figuration of Society**

This article is based on findings describing fundamental changes in the social order since the second half of the Twentieth century, notably technologically advanced mediatization and the transnationalization of a huge number of actions at economic, political, cultural, everyday and planning levels: A continually growing albeit unequally distributed, hierarchically structured increase in interconnections and interdependencies between individual and collective actors and places, an increase in individual and collective systems of reference, and an ever-growing quantity of circulating objects, technologies and human beings all lead to spatial re-figuration of the social order and changing social actions.

The notion of re-figuration is not restricted to the tendencies to heterogeneity, transgression of boundaries and informal flat networks. It seems, rather, that the re-figuration process builds on and unfolds within the modern “figuration of figurations”. Territorially based, centralistic and hierarchically scaled figurations do not disappear; rather, they are overlaid by deterritorialization, decentralization and flat chains of interdependencies. Thus, the new communication power and its tendency to global and transnational spatial orders is opposed by the re-enforcement of territorially fixed places, such as neighbourhoods in global cities, regional identities and national borders, as Brexit and similar phenomena indicate. Social movements opposing the global circulation of economic goods (as between Mexico and the US), knowledge (as in Turkey) and people (as demanded by populist anti-migration movements) are indicative of these conflicts as are the religious wars fought against the influx of Western globalization. As preliminary as the concept of re-figuration may be, it makes it possible to explain the dynamics of contemporary societies, the trans-

formation of structures of power and new patterns of inclusion on the basis of an analysis of its spatial dynamics.<sup>5</sup>

To give just one example, the construction of vast infrastructures for communication technologies and the expansion of technologically mediated communication to ever more spheres of social life make it necessary to consider the communicative dimension of society. Communication is not only used to reach an understanding about reality, as Habermas [1981] assumed; and it extends far beyond the “media system”; due to its implementation by new technologies it serves to directly bring about reality. Communication is used to coordinate actors, actions and even objects (i.e. by means of logistic systems); by virtue of digitalized communication with technologies and objects as well as the intra-action between technologies, communication not only makes it possible to accomplish services, such as in dialogical systems, it also makes it possible to produce objects in a very materialist sense, be it by industrial robots or by 3-D printing of any possible “thing”.

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<sup>5</sup> A more detailed analysis of the spatial re-figuration of society will be undertaken by our concerted research consortium “The Re-figuration of Space” proposed to the German Research Foundation (DFG) to be installed in 2017 at TU Berlin.

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## On the Spatial Re-Figuration of the Social World

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**Abstract:** Lefebvre famously had asked how “*espace*” and “*spacialité*” contribute to the constitution of societal order. In this paper we want to propose an answer to this question by sketching a new social theory in the making. On this basis we address the recent societal transformations, as they are indicated by empirical research, in terms of the re-figuration of spaces. Finally, we want to provide some preliminary specifications of what we mean by the re-figuration of space with reference to the processes of polycontexturalization, mediatization and translocalization. By polycontexturalization we mean that increasingly there are arrangements of space and multiple references to hitherto different spatial scales and dimensions which take effect or are put into effect simultaneously. Individual and collective actors are confronted with the challenge of following different spatial logics at the same time. By mediatization we refer to the fact that the constitution of space takes place in mediated forms spurred by advances in digital communication technologies. Proactive and reflexive communicative acts on different scales and levels, at once digital and face-to-face, are thus made possible or become inevitable. As a result of mediatization and multiple processes of circulation involving human beings, things and technologies, polycontexturalization implies what has come to be called translocalization, i.e. a continual coupling of different locations in conjunction with an increase in relevance of the individual location.

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*Keywords:* *Sociology of Spaces; Communicative Constructivism; Sociology of Knowledge.*

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