

Joost van Loon

The Significance of Space. A Comment on the Symposium

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The Significance of Space

A Comment on the Symposium

by Joost van Loon

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Since the so-called “spatial turn” of the 1980s – which was “led” by theorists such as Lefebvre, Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari and de Certeau and followed the so-called “linguistic turn” of the 1970s (Derrida, Lyotard) – there have been many commentators stressing the need to invoke spatial analysis as a core aspect of both empirical as well as theoretical social sciences. Although there are still many strands of social research and social theory that have very little concern for spatiality, there is hardly anyone today daring to speak out against the principal relevance of space for understanding social processes.

However, what exactly the implications of acknowledging the significance of space should be and how this should be translated methodologically, remains somewhat more obscure. It is for this reason, that in the Anglo-Saxon world in the early 1990s, social theorists such as David Harvey, Jane Jacobs, Doreen Massey, Rob Shields, Edward Soja, Nigel Thrift, John Urry and Sharon Zukin started to engage more systematically with “rethinking space” as a means for developing a more generic mode of theoretical social analysis. These theorists have provided empirically based alternatives to the more metaphorical deployment of spatial concepts one finds, for example, in the works of Bourdieu.

Rob Shields [1990; 2003; 2103], for example, further developed Henri Lefebvre’s [1991] concept of *l’espace* into “social spatialization”, which primarily highlighted the performative materiality of spatial practices or (re)production, representations of space or abstraction and spaces of representation or experience.

Thought together, these three provide the three axes of a relatively complete methodology of spatial analysis that is not bound to one or other particular type of data generation, but is able to combine triangulation and multi-level methods of both qualitative and quantitative research.

A key problem for social theorists concerned with space is that there is a tendency to ignore the fallacy of misplaced concreteness [Whitehead 1978]. This takes place when particular abstractions have been deployed to replace the concrete experiences from which they were supposedly derived. The best antidote against this is not to limit oneself exclusively to descriptive accounts of concrete empirical encounters, but instead to follow the process of abstraction each step of the way and treat it as a practice of translation. That is, abstraction is itself a practice.

One only needs to look at the work of urban planners, developers or architects to understand this empirically. Indeed, it is exactly in relation to practices of social spatialization that we can identify the actuality of abstraction at work relatively easily, because abstraction is one of the three main modes of social spatialization (alongside (re)production and experience). For (Marxist) Hegelians such as Lefèbvre, these three modalities are analytically and functionally distinct, because that allows us to think of spatialization as a dialectical (or trialectical) process. However, this is not a prerequisite. Social spatialization can also be thought in a more monistic sense: as the material-semiotic performativity of events-taking-place. The fact that modes of thought (re/presentation) and modes of extension (re/production) are always taking place as a singular actual occasion (i.e. what social scientists call “action”); that is to say, the singularity of an actual occasion is only conceivable if it is engaged as a material-semiotic performativity.

The significance of space is thus not merely a matter of stating that spatiality matters, but an invitation to treat spatiality as a matter of concern and this has consequences. For example, if we consider spatiality to be of significance to understanding the communicative construction of reality, it does not suffice as an argument to state that this is because every communicative act takes place *in* a space. This would merely lead to banal observations about particular spatial attributes that are merely present at hand. To engage properly with the significance of space, one needs to start somewhere else: Every communicative act *takes* place and thus every communicative act is an enactment of social spatialization. A place comes into being because space is enacted as ready-to-hand [Heidegger 1986]. Space matters because it actualizes the act in its associative readiness-to-hand.

This may sound somewhat cryptic – perhaps because the language deployed here is derived from a combination of Spinoza, Whitehead, Heidegger and Deleuze – but it is logically consistent with the ordinary experience of – for example – sound.

If we think of the initiation of communicative action – for we do not necessarily need sound but it is often a key aspect – it could have been done by gesture or eye contact – but, for example, the sound of a voice uttering a greeting enables us to consider the actuality of the taking place of communication. The taking place of the greeting “hi” highlights the significance of space as the moment in which the actual occasion of interpersonal recognition is established. The “hi” performatively inaugurates the interpersonal prehension of co-presence.

At very that moment, an interpersonal space is inaugurated and a communicative act has taken place. Symbolic Interactionists have already taught us over and over again that the “hi” of the greeting is much less informative and much more performative; it is to be understood as a ritual, comparable to bowing, genuflecting, or the kissing or shaking of hands. This performativity is in the first instance the inauguration of the interpersonal space and the actualization of a particular place, in this case the place of a meeting. The sound of the “hi” interrupts the otherwise less significant noise (or silence) of continuous actuality. This sound is the spatialization of the interaction, which allows it to take place.

As the actual instantiation of a “taking place” of an event, spatialization enables us to conceptualize “associations”, which is the hallmark of social sciences and of sociology in particular. That this is often conflated to “structure”, is merely because philosophy – according to Heidegger the entire western metaphysical tradition since Plato – has a tendency to identify being (ontos) in terms of essence or ontology (ontos-logos). That is to say, we deploy language to conceptualize actuality as durable, but – in a move that Derrida [1982] referred to as “the metaphysics of presence” [also see: Van Loon 1996] – the performative aspect of “inscription” becomes confused with that which the trace might be pointing towards, the latter being a matter of interpretation. Logos then shifts our attention to a universe of the assumed “always-already”.

However, empirical encounters with actual places show us that the durability of place is relative. For example, the experience of decay or decline is a core component of any “sense of place”. Moreover, the assumed structuring capacity of space can only manifest itself concretely in terms of prehensions, which are entirely processual. The processual-associative actualization referred to as “social spatialization” is thus nothing but an attempt to realize a virtual continuity of presence, which is what social scientists usually refer to as “ordering”.

The contributors to this special issue have provided a range of different approaches to thinking space that are indicative of the processual-associative dynamics of “ordering”. For example, Robin James Smith refers to the practical organisation of space in terms of “sharing” and “interactions” in terms of producing particular set-

tings of everyday life, with a particular focus on traffic. Ethnomethodology is shown to be an approach par excellence to develop insights into the way in which social spatialization is intelligible to members and thus resists the temptation to reify space as some kind of mystical exteriority.

At first sight, almost the opposite could be said of Deborah Reed-Danahay's approach, which – drawing on Bourdieu – seems to separate strictly at a conceptual level, the structured aspects of spatiality from the structuring activities of social spatialization. However, particularly drawing upon Bourdieu's earlier work, she reveals that he initially set out a sociological approach to “social space” in an ethnographic fashion that starts with accounts and encounters of ordinary, everyday life practices. Different from ethnomethodology however, Bourdieu did not refrain from layering these accounts with theoretical abstractions. As a result, his abstracted conception of social space has been deployed to provide a language for “structuration” that is no longer exclusively derived from concrete experiences and practices of those taking part in processes of social spatialization. The advantage of this has been that it enables a “sociological critique” that is not simply reduced to the assertion of political opinions but has its analytical base in the asymmetrical distribution of interests.

Thinking social spatialization through the conceptual frame of smooth vs striated space as developed by Deleuze & Guattari, Natallia Barykina focuses on Edward Zwick's film *Defiance* to enable descriptions of modes of resistance related to the smoothing of space, which are the hallmark of what Deleuze and Guattari [1988] referred to as “the nomadic war machine.” That she focuses on forest spaces is the more interesting, while Deleuze & Guattari's main trope in the *Treatise on Nomadology* had been that of the desert, as an example of the smooth space par excellence. The great advantage of Barykina's “smoothing of space” as conceptual intervention is that it enables us to consider two different modes of spatialization as “ordering” in relation to each other, rather than as mere space analytical categories. Nomadic ordering, for example, is not simply a matter of deterritorializing the state, but the formation of “habitable spaces”.

The concept of “proletarian public space” as developed by Borys Cymbrowski is an example of the way in which representations of space are being transformed by both spatial practices and spaces of representation themselves. The example of post-socialist transformations has been used to show the efficacy of social spatialization for the formation of a “public sphere” of political deliberation (including new urban social movements) and above all its privatization, especially in relation to urban development. Similar to the intersection between the modalities of striated and smooth space, proletarian public space is an arena of mutually exclusive interests.

The most explicit theoretical engagement with the concept of social spatialization has been provided by Hubert Knoblauch and Martina Löw, who have provided the outlines of a social theory of spatial refiguration of spatial logics with an account of (translocal) societal transformations, for example in terms of mediatization. Deploying the concept of Polycontexturalization (originally Luhmann's) they explicitly retain a notion of multiple scales and levels, which cut across different nestings of communicative actions, but are no longer tied to the somewhat plastic system-theoretical concerns over subsystems and operational self-referentiality. Polycontexturalization thus enables a thinking-together of spatiality and communication and a diffusion of spatial logics (representations of space) and generates a practice-oriented approach to social-spatialization as processual associations stemming from intersections between communicative acts in relation to technologically mediated figurations.

Finally, the article from Thea Boldt also concerns the conceptual articulation of spatiality and communication but focuses more specifically on empirical encounters with religious practices such as meditation and the organisation and mediation of rituals. Conceived within an emergent school of thought called "Communicative Constructivism", it devotes central attention to the ways in which religious practices of social spatialization evolve around communicative actions that also prehend the materiality of concrete situations, including – but not exclusively – modes of embodiment and mediation.

Upon reading these contributions, it will hopefully become clear that a focus on social spatialization does not in itself generate a homogenous trajectory for the development of social theory, but instead enables a multitude of basic assumptions and axiomatic principles to co-exist and develop in different directions. However, what a concern for social spatialization also allows for is a more dedicated engagement with the empirical and in particular practices and experiences of everyday life. It is by means of a dedicated focus on that which is experienced that different theoretical approaches to social spatialization may start to converge or at least enable a lessening of the fundamentalist desire to consider only those axioms that correspond with one's own metaphysical prejudices.

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A Comment on the Symposium

Abstract: In this short comment the author links the divergent approaches to theorizing social spatialization that are part of this special issue as prehension-based processual associations with the need to develop experience-oriented empirical encounters with spatial practices, representations of space (as practices of abstraction) and spaces of representation. The significance of space is therefore primarily noticeable in terms of empirical analyses of concrete communicative actions of everyday life in which social spatialization is understood as an attempt to establish orderings that extend the duration of actual occasions.

Keywords: Social Spatialization; Prehension; Ordering; Abstraction.

Joost van Loon is chair of General Sociology and Sociological Theory at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. He is also editor-in-chief of the journal *Space and Culture*. His main areas of research are Sociological Theory, Empirical Philosophy, Communication, Culture, Media, Science and Technology, Religion and Risk. He is author of, among others, *Risk and Technological Culture* [Routledge, 2002] and *Media Technology: Critical Perspectives* [McGraw-Hill, 2008].