

Nov. 5 The New Cultural History [2]: Post-modern and Post-structural Approaches to the Representation of Space

Some Thoughts on Space

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"It is not without reason that many historians show an affinity for maps... For the historical act is always also a spatial act: events take place... Time's passage, too, can only be comprehended as a series of tableaux... Narrative's illusion, that the movement produces the meaning, is literally grounded in a blindness towards the work of the spatial frame ... for time to be the sole bearer of significance.. its relationship of dependency with space must be hidden from view" [Kierstead, 294]

"The present epoch will perhaps above all be the epoch of space" --Michel Foucault
"[Social] space is a (social) product... space has taken on, within the present mode of production, within society as it actually is, a sort of reality of its own, a reality clearly distinct from, yet much like, those assumed in the same global process by commodities, money, and capital... if space is produced, if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with history... since ... each mode of production has its own particular space, the shift from one mode to another must entail the production of a new space." Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), p. 26,46.

"MIT struggles with the production of space. Its ability to produce technological and scientific ideas for the great wide world outruns its ability to provide itself with a place in the world to continue to generate ideas... [a] source of the spatial crisis has been the deterritorializing effect of the information age... there is little that is virtual about the information age. Increased production of virtual space does not reduce the demands for space in Cambridge 02139." -- Rosalind Williams, *Retooling: A Historian Confronts Technological Change*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p.177-178.

We walk in it, sit in it, sleep in it, ride through it. We like to think we own it: we talk of "personal space"; we say "Get out of my space"; or we say "In your face" when we invade someone else's space. But to paraphrase Marx's famous statement from *The German Ideology*: "Men [and women] make their own space, but not under conditions of their own choosing..." Wider forces shape all the spaces we live in, and the space itself affects, often unconsciously, our thoughts and behavior.

Studies of the historical construction of space are gaining popularity in a number of fields. Some claim that the shift to a post-modern consciousness entails fundamentally the replacement of time by space as the basic controlling factor of modern life. [James Joyce thought that time and space are the "twin Gods" that rule our lives.] If the computer and modern technology have speeded up time until its constraints no longer control us, the need to move the body through physical space still remains [until you enter the virtual world, of course: but even there, you need space for all your equipment: see above]. Cultural geography examines the different forms of symbolization of space and derives from this an analysis of the changes in global structures. David Harvey's *The Condition of*

Postmodernity focuses especially on the changing perceptions of space in the city resulting from the new forms of industrial capitalist production. Postmodernity is the result of a new compression of space and time by global capitalism, producing experiences of urban life that are far more personal and much less civic. Great city squares, public open places that used to be centers of major political life, as in the French Revolution, now are fragmented into isolated people with Walkmans in their ears. But Tiananmen 1989 shows that the vital center formed by a vast urban square has still not yet lost its political significance. [Wu Hung]

Looking back at historical experiences, particularly of urban space, is a way to unite disparate works in the history of architecture, urban planning, and urban social history. [Look for some of this in Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*]. Recent moves toward the cultural conception of space, however, focus much more on images, language, and artifacts, than on material conditions of life. There is especially a flourishing genre of studies of colonialism as expressed through representations of empire, linked to the formation of nation-states in reaction as "imagined communities" defined by language, maps, museums, and histories. [Anderson, Mitchell, Winichakul, the subaltern Studies school]. The European conception of Egypt was created first back home by the exhibitions and scale models of its cities; when Europeans went to Cairo, they saw what they had already been prepared to see: an exhibit. But the real city disappointed in comparison to its model: with a model, you can see the entire space from above, and comprehend its entirety; it is also static and always open to the same gaze. The real city is confusing, fluctuating, and produces disorienting immersion and fleeting encounters: hence "the Orient" was seen as chaotic, alien, frightening, and backward; hence Oriental people needed the imperialist to put things in rational "order".

All representations are abstractions, selections of certain essential features from the infinite flux of sensations; but who decides which features are 'essential'? Maps are a good example of how power relations determine what is represented and what is not. They contain erasures and silences along with details. Power holders feature what matters to them most: the location of castles, churches, roads [for armies], and markets [to be taxed], and leave out the local sites important to those who live there. Recent shifts in the history of cartography mark a change away from a Whiggish history, typical of old-style history of science, which viewed maps as getting closer and closer to scientific representation of the objective world. The new cultural cartography views all maps as cultural products that reveal power relations and shape conceptions of space. [Cf., by the way, Michael Fischer discussion of his mother's autobiography as a geodesic scientist, in *Writing Culture*.] [Harley & Woodward]

Thongchai Winichakul describes the change in mapping Thailand from viewing the land as the site of a religious pilgrimage, linked by linear journeys from one temple to another, toward seeing it as a flat space located in one portion of a global grid, with fixed boundaries. For the premodern Siamese state, power all coagulated at the central capital [Ayutthaya, then Bangkok], and tapered off toward the periphery. The boundaries with other states were unimportant, because no significant resources lay there. The premodern rulers could not understand the obsession of the British, moving East from Burma, with fixed boundaries, guard posts, and survey markers. But new states had to exert equal sovereignty over all their territories, and the frontiers were especially important: they marked the sharp boundary between the national self and the Other. The modernization of

Thailand was not a smooth process of reform, but a radical reconfiguration of the conceptual space of the nation. The "geo-body" of the nation was created out of new maps.

The influence of Michel Foucault is latent in these analyses, if not explicitly invoked. Most relevant is *Discipline and Punish* [*Surveiller et Punir*], his analysis of the shift in regimes of control and surveillance in the modern period. The terrifying Panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham as the ideal prison was never actually built anywhere, but as an idea it epitomizes the terror of the liberal-rational order: The individual prisoner watches over his own behavior, isolated in his cell, because he never knows who else is watching: there may be no guard at all in the central watch tower, but he cannot tell. It is the simple organization of space in the prison that creates the combination of utter solitude and utter lack of privacy. Likewise, Foucault's concept of *quadrillage* [creation of a grid] links the modern power structure to the universal grid patterns on global maps and to Mitchells' description of orderly barracks, schools, and villages ["The inhabitants of Egypt were made inmates of their own villages": note the prison metaphor]. Order, in the modern colonial empire, combines the standardized, replicable pattern of the grid, globally reproduced, with the isolated boxes that contain the individual, who thinks, foolishly, that he is "free". [But is this solely a product of the modern world? Think of the imperial Chinese examination system, which locked candidates into a cell for three days or more until they finished their exams. These were "cultural prisons" too.]

Kotkin views the Stalinist state as in fact a colonial imposition on its own people, using the same techniques: rational urban planning used the idea of "living space": all human experience of space abstracted into a standardized number of square meters. The depressing housing blocks you can see in Russia, China, or in U.S. public housing projects reflect the same Utopian bureaucratic mentality. All of them met resistance from daily life: people don't like being part of impersonal grand housing schemes: they subvert them. James Scott's work describes the vast array of rationalistic schemes of planning and measurement devised by urban elites to organize rural and urban space as impositions of arbitrary power, justified by science, on the cursed diversity of local people: this includes scientific forestry, cartographic measurement of land for tax surveys, urban planning schemes from Le Corbusier's Paris to Tanzania, etc. All of them fail in the end, revealing the disasters created by excessive abstraction from living human experience. Isaiah Berlin likes to quote in defense of human pluralism the German proverb, "From the crooked timber of humanity was never any straight thing made". Both Scott and Berlin much prefer foxes to hedgehogs.

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