

## Contested Places and the Politics of Space

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*This article deals with certain problems related to efforts to conceptualize the spatial dimensions of urban conflicts. Since it is no coincidence that urban conflicts are so intimately interwoven with territorial claims, I will focus on the peculiar interplay between agency and territoriality using the still fuzzy conceptualizations of the global-local interplay as a prime example.*

Fierce debates about space and place run deep in the social sciences today. Attempts to spatialize social theory go hand in hand with a far-reaching critique of well-established sociological concepts, and this dramatic change of perspective seems to be establishing a new and quite revolutionary paradigm of social theory. The historical distance between banalizing, or even negating, and negotiating space has been an amazingly short one. Two decades ago the British sociologist Peter Saunders was just expressing common sense when he stated that “social theory has been quite right to treat space as a backdrop against which social action takes place [...] Space does not enter into what we do in any meaningful sense, because mere space can have no causal properties and is quite incapable of entering into anything. It is passive; it is context.” And, he concludes, “that there is nothing for theory to say about space” (Saunders 1989: 231f.).

This was, of course, only moments before globalization discourse finally took off, forcing social scientists to come to terms with a phenomenology of the social, basically evoked by processes of socio-spatial reconfigurations and new modes of the spatial organization of social relations. To realize the radical shift to space-related theorizing, one only needs to bear in mind that the global is first and foremost nothing other than a socio-spatial scale that, while

relationally differentiated, is also tied into the logic of scale: of the local, the regional, and the national. If one eliminated this relationality of scale, the story of globalization could not be narrated at all.

In outlining this background, I will use quotidian conceptualizations of the global-local nexus as a point of departure to offer some critical comments on the—thus far—neglected question of the local. Reflections on the global production of locality, so the thesis goes, might not only change the dominant representation of the global. They might also redirect theoretical attention to the power of places. But before I take a closer look at the different stages of globalization discourse to characterize the particular state of space representations, I will briefly summarize some of the guiding premises of this undertaking.

First, it has now become almost conventional wisdom to conceptualize space as a social construction that simultaneously structures and is structured by social action. Human agency itself has to be looked at in its space-producing and space-consuming qualities. It was Emile Durkheim (1965) who, in his famous book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, formulated the idea that the spatial organization of groups serves as a prime model for the mental organization of the world. If the focus is placed on the spatial nature of identities, meanings, classifications, world-view structures, etc., this could prove to be an analytically promising way to conceptualize all kinds of social action—from the most intimate face-to-face interaction to global conflicts—as distinctive variants of a “politics of space.”

Second, two general modes of spatiality, or more precisely, of the spatial organization of social relations, can be distinguished. Social relations can be territorialized relying on a well-defined and forcefully maintained territorial unit which clearly marks inside and outside and gives meaning to legitimacy, rule enforcement, and collective identity. Or they can be organized in a deterritorialized way that does not depend on borders and territorial enclosures, but on far-reaching networks. The former space-as-container theory is attributed to the territorial nation-state and its dominant epistemology, which sees social relations being both organized and reproduced exclusively in territorially defined and spatially isomorphic entities. The later space-as-flows ontology (Castells 1996; 1997) is usually imagined with reference to the space-transcending strategies of global capital as well as to the particular space-related politics of translocalities and global diasporas.

Third, there appears to be an intimate and quite disturbing relationship between space production and identities. Just as space is always a relational product of multiple trajectories, interactions, practices, conflicts, and struggles between social groups (cf. Löw 2001), so are identities, be they ascribed to places and/or to individuals and collective actors. Categorical identities, however, have a tendency to become territorialized. Territorial identities fuel the politics of space. A similarly complicated relation exists between space produc-

tion and knowledge production. The now famous Foucauldian power-knowledge nexus may have to be extended and transformed into a power-knowledge-space relation. On a quite simple level, it is important to realize that if the production of space goes hand in hand with the evocation of knowledge, then knowledge is space-related. Certain spaces and places do not only contain distinctive stocks of cultural knowledge; they also limit the scope of what might be perceived as legitimate knowing. “Placing” categories give meaning to categories like gender, class, ethnicity, etc., just as categories give particular meaning to places. The postcolonial decentering of Eurocentric world-view structures is just one—albeit important—case in point. Common references to “local cultures” might be another.

Fourth, if spatial patterns, from the physically built environment to symbolic landscapes and categorical identities, can—and probably have to—be discerned as place-related, then the shift of theoretical attention from the global to the logic of locality might be indeed not only feasible but necessary.

Since all these issues are negotiated under the header of globalization as a new spatial order, I will briefly describe some of the basic controversies within this field.

It is not by accident that in a first round of globalization studies the nation-state served as a privileged point of departure to depict the “global” as its opposite. And it is not by accident either that urban studies, and especially world- and global-city models became the prime examples for identifying alternative modes of spatial organization. The notion of a world consisting of a multiplicity of territorially fixed, hermetically sealed, culturally homogeneous entities for which “territoriality” is the only and exclusive model of spatial organization—aptly characterized as “methodological nationalism” by Anthony Smith (1979)—was abandoned by multiple deterritorialization approaches that revealed globalization to be an ongoing process of production of spaces of flows against which the now traditional spaces of place are bound systematically to loose momentum. The thesis of the end of the nation-state was grounded in the thesis of the end of territoriality. And this theorizing paved the way for both a highly generalized, powerful image of the “global” as an unfettered, free, and unbounded space, and a highly generalized, paling image of the local as relict of the past.

All strands of globalization theories claim that the global has become the most important frame for organizing socio-spatial relations. Standard definitions, which depict globalization as all those “processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, a global society” (Albrow 1996), however, are underestimating, or even neglecting, the context-generating potentiality of the local by reducing this spatial scale to a traditional and territorialized form of socio-spatial relations. The question of what the global actually is has tended as a rule to be answered by referring

rather vaguely to the disappearance of the local. As a cumulative effect of globalization—flexible accumulation, global migration, deregulation, media-generated images of the world, new communication technologies, and so forth—processes of space formation could be discerned, which for some authors seemed to support images of cultural homogenization. Whether it was depicted as a totally Americanized, McDonaldized culture (Ritzer 1993), or as a generalized consumerist culture exploited by transnational corporations and ruled by a new emerging transnational class (Sklair 2001), in these views the global, “world society,” and so forth derived from and represented first and foremost the geographic expansion of the West. Fettered by an unreflected technological determinism—globalization is as inevitable as technological change—such narratives represented, at least to a certain extent, continuations of the old functionalist modernization approaches (cf. Massey 1999; Wimmer 2001).

It was during the second stage of the globalization discourse, looking beyond mere economic globalization, when social scientists began to reject the homogenization paradigm. Instead of conceptualizing globalization as an ongoing process of economic, political, and cultural homogenization—the story of the outward expansion of European modernity—analytical attention was directed to the emergence of new societal forms, the mixing of local and global under the headers of “glocalization” (Robertson 1995), “creolization” (Hannerz 1996), and “hybridization” (Pieterse 1995; Hall 1991; Tomlinson 1999; Urry 2000). Attempts to criticize methodological Eurocentrism went hand in hand with forceful debates on “global modernities” (Featherstone et al. 1995), “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000), or “uneven modernities” (Randeria 2002). New key concepts like “cosmopolitanism” (Learmount/Vertovec/Cohen 2002; Beck 2000; Hannerz 1996) and “diaspora” (Clifford 1997; Hall 1990; Gilroy 1993; Cohen 1997; critically: Anthias 1998; Mitchell 1997) promised to capture the impact of these global-local interplays on worldview structures, cultural knowledge, and identity constructions. But even though particular emphasis was placed on cultural syncretism and the crucial global-local nexus, a kind of overblown representation of the global as a free, unbounded, and deterritorialized space of flows still remains in place. The pitfalls of this representation of the global seem to be at least threefold.

First, contrary to conceptualizations of globalization as an inevitable process of deterritorialization and state erosion, territoriality in general, and territorial states in particular, seem destined to remain powerful organizational modes of socio-spatial relations. If what we identify as global is still “grounded in national territories” (Sassen 1996: 13), then theoretical attention has to be directed to processes of spatial reconfiguration which do not necessarily end up in deterritorialized flows but also include powerful tendencies toward re-territorialization. The fact that “capitalism,” the “nation-state,” or the “daily

newspaper” have gained global presence does not imply that *India Today*, *the Boston Globe*, and the *Darmstädter Echo* are becoming indistinguishable. Poverty is contextualized differently in Poland than it is in Zambia; migrants are confronted with different institutional regimes in England and in Saudi Arabia; and even average Americans may have a media-transmitted view of the Arab world which is significantly different from the one held by a German. In short, the constraints which local cultures impose on global flows are and will remain quite considerable.

Second, it is, in analytical terms, not convincing to connect socio-spatial scales like the local and the global with modes of socio-spatial organization. For what reasons should the local be conceptualized as a territorial mode of sociation, while the global is perceived exclusively as a deterritorialized space of flows?

Third, there is a strong tendency toward categorical confusion in the way that the global and the local are incessantly used as synonyms for space and place and vice versa. “Opposing global with local,” states Robert Latham, “is quite intuitive since the former term ultimately refers to some kind of claim about the range of forces operating across space. Typically, the local is either a discrete element within that global range or simply a site or phenomenon subject to global forces that are external to it” (Latham/Kassimir/Callaghy 2001: 6). If one, just for the sake of the argument, follows Bruno Latour’s thought experiment concerning the Eurasian railway system (Latour 1993), the dilemma involved becomes obvious. Not really global, though of considerable reach, this system stretches from Gibraltar to Vladivostok, from Hanoi to Bergen. But at every point on our imagined journey we will find people, huts, villages, stations, and so forth. Most important, however, nobody, neither the traveler nor the conductor, ever crosses the magic border that separates the local from the global. And is this not equally the case with transnational corporations, whose global networks are composed of local branches designed to exploit local conditions as effectively as possible? And those global flows: of people, images, cultural artifacts? Do they not unfold their social and symbolic potential only at the moment in which they are re-grounded and reembedded locally? Or as Doreen Massey strongly insists: “Could global finance exist without its very definite groundedness in that place, the city of London, for example. Could it be global without being local?” (Massey 2004: 8).

Yet representations of the global opposing the local still remain in place, feeding a power matrix for which the global is closely associated with capital, progress deterritorialization, and unbounded space, while the local is linked to place and tradition, inhabited by the usual suspects: the poor, minorities, women entrapped in local cultures and generally victims of outside forces (Massey 2006). The devaluation of the local parallels the devaluation of place

(Agnew 1989). To imagine the local as a product of the global is to imagine place as the product of relations from elsewhere, implying that place has no agency since all that matters has to be placed outside of place. But the very fact that places are also the moments “through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced,” in short: that places, as Doreen Massey states, are “agents *in* globalisation” (2004: 11) must be seen as quite incontestable if one looks for example at London or New York City as places for which nobody would willingly assume the status of pure victims of global forces.

Given these insights, a provisional subtotal of three decades of globalization discourse supports the impression that a major shift of theoretical attention is under way. After the discovery of the global it is now the reevaluation of the local, or more precisely: explorations of place and locality that have to be foregrounded. In a phenomenological tradition locality refers to the construction of that peculiar horizon of closeness, familiarity, and knowing by which individuals and groups (re)produce themselves. The production of locality as a daily effort of everyday life practices implies the thesis that local settings and places are not just context-driven spatial units but have a context-generating potential as well.

This search for the relatedness of agency and space has had a profound impact on urban studies, especially on the mode in which the “city” is constructed as an object of scientific knowledge. I only exaggerate slightly in stating that since its emergence/inception as a scientific object, the city has been dealt with primarily as a subcategory of such concepts as society, modernization, market economy, and so forth. This logic of subsumption, paired with an unenlightened functionalism, has a longstanding tradition that goes back to the Chicago school of urban studies, for which not the city of Chicago, but the city as a field of experience, a laboratory of social change, deviance, segregation, etc. was of prime interest. It continues with the new urban-studies approach, which analyzes the systemic function of the city within the transformation processes of capitalist socialization. And even global-city research was blamed for reducing the city to its geostrategic position and role within economic globalization—and thus not only for neglecting but for systematically missing the cultural and discursive strategies of constructing the particularity of a city. The critique, aptly formulated years ago by John Friedman, that global-city models miss the locality of their objects, “their rootedness in a politically organized life space with its own history, institutions, culture and politics” is still topical (1995: 34). Berlin is not Prussia, but without Prussia, Berlin would not be Berlin.

Another quite noteworthy strand in urban studies is the position certain cities hold as kind of showcases within the historical geography of urban thinking (cf. Crang/Thrift 2001). For decades Chicago served as an uncontest-

ed model for urban growth. Nineteenth-century Paris became a metonym for urbanity and modernity, Los Angeles represented the postmodern *sans phrase*, and New York seemed to be the archetypical global city.

In all these cases the undercurrent that place has no agency seems to be taken as a given. But is it not time to redirect analytical attention to the particularity of a particular city? Is it not time to conceptualize the various modes of the production of locality in a comparative perspective with a view to identifying local classification systems, stocks of knowledge, and the role they play in constituting, contesting, receiving, and changing whatever is meant by the global?

Cities are more than nodal points within the global space of flows, more than locations of a headquarter economy of global capitalism, more than touchdown areas for various globally circulating artifacts. They belong historically and systematically to that space of places for which territoriality, habitus and habitat, place-making, and politics of space, in short: all those efforts that go into the production of locality, are quintessential (cf. Berking 2002).

One of the major obstacles encountered in conceptualizing locality is opposing space and place, associating place with groundedness, concreteness, authenticity, and territorial enclosure. But as long as the global is not the outside-of-the-local, space is not the outside-of-place. Following the line of argument advanced by Henry Lefèbvre (1991), namely that social groups, classes, or factions of classes cannot constitute themselves or recognize one another as subjects unless they generate or produce a space, the production of space must always been seen as embedded in processes of place-making. To analyze the concreteness of a place, however, does not necessarily mean focusing solely on local preconditions and falling into the trap of buying into the idea of territorial enclosure. The question, then, is whether social sciences should not make use of the geographic concept of scale to avoid any romanticized notions of place. Socio-spatial scales do structure and order perception. They are socially constructed by individuals and groups who, via this politics of spatial distance, create borders, mark belongings, and territorialize identities. If one takes the body-related space of proximity, the local, the regional, the national, the global, as typical relational socio-spatial scales, the theoretical challenge would be not to limit concepts of place and locality to the local but to use all socio-spatial scales from the local to the global to depict the reach and deep structure of this particular place.

On the surface, it is easy to describe the politics of space. When the city council of Chicago, for example, decided years ago to give leeway for ethnic minorities to rename their residential areas in keeping with their origins, Devon street became Indhira Gandhi Boulevard at the heart of the Indian community, changing to Golda Meir Street only two blocks away, while simply

remaining Devon for the rest of the population. The interesting point here is that even though the majority of Indians do not live on Indhira Gandhi Boulevard, this place has not only become an attractive tourist site for ethnic food and fashion, but also a highly contested space used by Bangladeshi and Pakistani youth movements to protest against whatever they find amiss in politics in India. This example demonstrates both: that place-making has a territorializing aspect and that the agency of place can not be fully understood as exclusively confined to the local.

But the question of the production of locality runs much deeper inasmuch as its aim is to depict the very particularity of cities. In an impressive comparative study covering New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, Janet Abu-Lughod addressed the logics of the production of locality in an attempt to unveil the “unique personalities” of these cities. What started out as an incisive critique of the ahistorical and overgeneralized character of global-city research, and is then followed by an exemplary historical reconstruction of the natural, the spatial and climatic preconditions and an in-depth analysis of the interactive relatedness to the world, the migration-related changes in the economy, politics, and culture of these cities finally leads to a precise description of three distinct local cultures whose spatial forms, logics of incorporation, life styles, and local politics could not be more different. That the very construction of urban space plays a major role in constituting the biography of these cities is beyond doubt. “Spatial patterns are deeply associated with variations in social life and the relationships among residents, and it is these social relations that yield differences in the patterns of urban living that give to each city its quintessential character” (1999: 3). Although Abu-Lughod is of course aware of the problem that much of what has happened within these cities is placed in quite different and distant geographic spaces, she nonetheless is able to demonstrate the extent to which answers and solutions are locally contextualized. That the end of Fordist reconstruction affected Chicago in a quite different way than it did L.A. or New York, that the socio-spatial concentration of Latinos in L.A. places constraints on ethnic coalitions and the politics of identity, while New York, thanks to its ethnic diversity, is still doomed to play the ethnic poker game and Chicago remains entrapped in its longstanding racist color line—these are only some of the local structurations which determine the atmosphere, but also the action and problem-solving capacities of the three cities. Even individuals seem to be forced to adapt habitually to the particular style of a particular city. “Space in New York,” Abu-Lughod claims, citing journalist Joseph Giovannini, “collects people; in Los Angeles it separates them.” And: “If you drop any New Yorker other than Woody Allen in Los Angeles, he will eventually become acquisitive about cars ... if you drop any Angelo other than the Beach Boys in New York, he

will eventually choose his neckties for their coded social meanings” (Giovannini, quoted after Abu-Lughod 1999: 423).

If we transferred into the field of sociology Ulf Hannerz’ critique of urban anthropology as anthropology *in* the city that needs to be complemented by an anthropology *of* the city, we might be more than tempted to contemplate a concept of a sociology of cities.

British cultural geographer Doreen Massey has suggested conceptualizing places as products of social relations, as “meeting places.” “This is a notion of place where specificity (local uniqueness, a sense of place) derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of relative isolation [...] but precisely from the absolute particularity of the mixture of influence found together there” (1999: 22). If one attempts to describe the particular character of a place with a view to the way in which the world is represented here as compared to there, one might be able to uncover the cumulative structure of local cultures, the physical and symbolic sediments of a city, as those decisive materials which give particular meaning to action orientation and future opportunity structures. Focusing on the production of locality might offer not only an alternative perspective on cities as an object of scientific knowledge but also a prospect for producing a knowledge that, beyond global talk, could contribute significantly to clarifying the still fuzzy problem of the global-local interplay.

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