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## **“Identity”: some parallels between feminist debate and the identity of place**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Der Beitrag untersucht die Beziehungen zwischen dem, wie wir über die Identität von „Orten“ (places) – seien es Örtlichkeiten, Regionen oder Nationalstaaten – nachdenken und der „räumlichen Architektur“, durch die wir (implizit oder explizit) das Konzept „Identität“ in einem mehr allgemeinen Sinne wahrnehmen. Die Autorin analysiert dabei insbesondere die Parallelen zwischen neuen feministischen Positionen (zugunsten eines Denkens in Beziehungsbegriffen) und ihrem eigenen, die Identität von „Orten“ konzeptionalisierenden Ansatz. Beide Ansätze werden kritisiert, weil sie das Konzept „Identität“ als eine Position vergegenwärtigen, die auf jeweils in sich abgeschlossene Einheiten hinausläuft. Statt dessen wird ein identitätsbezogener Ansatz vorgeschlagen, der Identität als offen und durch Wechselbeziehung konstituiert thematisiert.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this conference is the exchange of ideas. British and German geographies (neither in itself a single entity) have different histories, theoretical debates and experiences. We have talked much of ‘travelling theory’, but we all also know well that theory’s voyages are not simple or easy. There are misunderstandings to cross, distinct connotations to be navigated, different languages to be negotiated.

It is with all this in mind that I begin this paper with an attempt to explain how I began, some years ago now, to re-think my concepts of place and region. Hopefully this contextualisation will enrich understanding of where the present re-theorisations are coming from.

Although there is a longer history of concern about these issues, 1989 was in many ways crucial, and in one particular respect. For that year and those that followed saw a resurgence of nationalisms on a new scale and with a new intensity. Moreover many of these new nationalisms (and other

forms of parochialism) were characterised also by exclusivity, by a search for authentic roots, by a hostility to at least some designated others. There was violence in defence of 'place'.

This was a deeply dispiriting aspect of this period of history. Dispiriting in itself but also dispiriting because, while I deplored the violence, the hostility, indeed the whole political framing of the issue, I nonetheless did not want to give up on one of the things which has always attracted me to 'geography' – a love of place and an appreciation of specificity.

Moreover, over this same period, other discourses were developing which gave rise to very similar dilemmas. There was, most importantly, that line of argument which had it that globalisation was going on apace, that it was threatening every stability and every specificity that we had once known, and that in this context – in the face of all these threats – the 'retreat to place' was understandable. It represented a protective pulling-up of drawbridges and a building of walls against the new invasions. 'Place', on this reading, was the locus of retreat from the Other.

Both of these events of the late '80s/early '90s (the growth of nationalisms and that particular version of the global/local discourse) presented 'place' in negative terms and left me in a quandary as to how to think it otherwise.

Two points can be made immediately.

First, all of this involved very strong rearticulations of popular and hegemonic geographical imaginations. There was the imagination of 'states/nations' (elided) as exclusive, the imagination of 'globalisation' as the emergence of an unbounded free space, the imagination of 'places' as havens of protectiveness. Quite often, these imaginations contradicted each other, and contradictory imaginations could be mobilised with great power by the same people or social forces. (In Britain, for instance, many on the right wing of the political spectrum managed to promulgate *both* a notion of free space without boundaries – the free-trade model of globalisation – *and* a notion of protective bounded places – the 'little England' argument against international in-migration.) The point to be made is that geographical imaginations are of fundamental importance in the construction of political discourses.

Second, however, all of these discussions and discourses involved thinking of *place* (as opposed to space) in a highly particular way. This was an imagination of place as closed, coherent, integrated, as authentic, as 'home', as a secure retreat. This is an understanding of place which, in my political lexicon, I would characterise as 'reactionary', or at least as potentially so. And so the question became how to escape this dilemma: how to abandon this understanding of 'place' and yet retain an appreciation

of specificity, of uniqueness. It was thus that I pursued my thoughts about how we might re-imagine place (or locality, or region) in a more 'progressive' way. How, in other words, can we conceptualise and appreciate the 'local', the 'regional', while at the same time insisting on internationalism. It was in this context that I worked towards what I would come to call 'a global sense of place'.<sup>1</sup>

A final reflection is in order here on these introductory remarks. This is that what was at issue was finding a way of thinking about place/region which would enable certain questions – important at that moment – to be addressed. What was needed was a way of unlocking what had become a conceptual impasse. In other words the search was not for 'the eternal truth of how we should define places' but for a way of thinking which would allow us to address questions which at that time seemed pressing.

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In this paper I explore just one aspect of this process of re-thinking, that is: the connection between the reconceptualisation of place, on the one hand, and issues of feminism, on the other. Even within this, however, there is too much to say in one paper: there are many such connections. So, focusing-down yet further. I intend to explore just one of them. This is the connection between spatiality and the construction of identity.

There are two intertwined issues here. On the one hand there is the issue of the identity of spaces (of places and regions); and on the other hand there is the spatiality of identity itself. In other words, not only do we give identities to places/regions, but also there are implicit and explicit spatialisations in the construction of identities (whether those identities be personal, social/collective, or regional). That is to say, there are 'spatial architectures of identity' – the spatial imaginations, if you like, through which identities (again, whether of group, place, or individual person) are structured.

### **Bounded identities**

As the opening discussion of imaginations of place indicated, one powerful and very common approach to the construction of identity, and one with a very clear spatiality, is that of bounded identities. This is the approach

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<sup>1</sup> The development of these arguments in more detail can be found in: MASSEY *Space, place and gender*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1994.

which draws a line around that which is to be identified, in order to say this is me, or England, or Yorkshire, or the gay community. The first and foremost characteristic of such identities is that they are bounded.

But such identities also have other spatial characteristics. Thus, their establishment involves the construction of an inside and an outside, an 'us' versus a 'them', a 'me' versus other people. We are English because we are *not* continental European, white because *not* black, masculine because *not* feminine, and so forth. These identities, in other words, are constructed through counterposition; there is a clear and mutually exclusive inside and outside. Such identities also involve, moreover, the expulsion of unwanted characters or characteristics on to the 'outside'. Thus Edward Said in his discussion of the project of 'orientalism' pointed to the projection on to 'the Orient' of characteristics of femininity/sexuality with which the West itself did not want to be associated. Moreover, he argued, this expulsion of unwanted characteristics was as much about the construction of the identity of 'the West' as of that of 'the Orient'. Others, similarly, have written about the spatial exclusion of groups considered to be 'other': gypsies, for instance, or those considered to be 'insane'. Or again, in some of my own research on scientists the importance has emerged, in establishing the identity of 'the scientist', not only of the obvious positive characteristics (logical ability, etc) but of negative characteristics – that is characteristics which the 'identity' definitely wishes to be dissociated from. Such identities, then, are established through (an attempt at) a process of purification; they are built around a particular form of binary of mutual exclusivity: A/-A. Finally, such identities are somehow internally defined. These are identities whose characteristics are understood as emerging from an internalised history of locatable origins. They tend therefore in this to be fixed and backward-looking. They work with notions of authenticity ('the essence of Englishness') and in that sense are essentialist.

These identities then (or, rather, these approaches to the construction of identity) have a very definite spatiality: they are bounded, counterposed to an outside and internally purified. They also have a particular temporality: they are (said to be) fixed for eternity, and they are probably backward-looking.

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This spatial architecture of identity, however, can pose serious problems.

First of all, these spaces of identity are extremely difficult to maintain. To begin with, the boundaries need guarding. The language of debates

about immigration bears witness to this in the appeals to concepts of who has a right to live where. Or, in a very different case of social identity-construction, there have been long and tortuous debates about who does and who does not count as a member of the gay community. Moreover, not only do external boundaries need guarding but also there is a need for internal policing. And so there can be debates over who is and who is not a 'real German'. Are you 'gay' if occasionally you have a straight relationship? Apart from the oppressiveness of the imposition of conformity which this entails it can also (for instance in some recent extreme forms of identity politics) lead to the maintenance of identity itself becoming a 'politics' in itself. Thus Judith Butler has written: "The despair evident in some forms of identity politics is marked by the elevation and regulation of identity-positions as a primary political policy. When the articulation of coherent [ie: bounded] identity becomes its own policy, then the policing of identity takes the place of a politics in which identity works dynamically in the service of a broader cultural struggle toward the rearticulation and empowerment of groups that seeks to overcome the dynamic of repudiation and exclusion by which 'coherent subjects' are constituted" (BUTLER 1993, p. 117.). And anyway, in some measure this internal policing frequently 'fails': the unwanted characteristics turn up inside the boundaries after all; the repressed returns. In other words, the purification of the space of identity, or of the identity of spaces, is an impossible project. These spatialities of identity are probably not viable. What they search after above all is stability and security (the retreat to nationalism, to 'local place', to 'home'), but in fact through the very nature of the spatiality of their construction they are highly vulnerable to *destabilisation*.

Secondly, moreover, this spatial architecture of identity, through the structure of the power-relations on which it is based, is harmful. On the one hand it always involves cruelties to both self and other: the denial of the complexity and relatedness of 'self' and the rejection and exclusion of others. On the other hand, at the extreme, when an attempt is made to enforce a coincidence between a purified cultural-group identity and a purified spatial-territorial identity there is the potential to end up with horrors such as apartheid and ethnic cleansing.

### **Relational identities**

It is in part in recognition of all these difficulties that arguments have developed in many quarters for the need for 'relational thinking'.

Many feminists in particular have been to the forefront in arguing the importance of thinking identity in terms of interconnection. In other words,

I am 'me' not because of who I am not but because of the relationships in which I stand to others and what I make of those relationships. I am me not because I am a woman not a man, white not black, but because I am sister, daughter, friend, boss, teacher .... It is not the boundary between us but our relationship which gives us our identity.

Now, this approach to identity is sometimes seen as being specifically feminist because of an argument from a particular branch of psychoanalysis (object-relations theory). Briefly, to the point of caricature, this runs that in societies (like ours) where virtually all the child-rearing is done by women, little girls and little boys have very different jobs to do in forming their identities. In particular boys are under social pressure to distinguish themselves from the mother. It is a highly provocative set of propositions of which many criticisms have been made. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that *politically* there has been a very strong argument from many feminists for 'thinking in terms of relations'. And one very strong political argument for this is that this approach recognises the interrelations on/through which our identities are formed, while in contrast the bounded identities formed by exclusion/rejection hide the map of power through which those very identities are in fact produced. Butler again: "To the extent that subject-positions are produced in and through a logic of repudiation and abjection, the specificity of identity is purchased through the loss and degradation of connection, and the map of power which produces and divides identities differently can no longer be read" (BUTLER, 1993, p. 114).

It is at this point important to stress that focusing on the relations through which identities are constructed does not imply that all those relations are benign or egalitarian. 'Relations' means real relations – material practices which change over time. Recognising our interrelatedness means recognising that these relations are power-relations and that they may well be in some sense 'unequal'. The argument is precisely that such inequalities can only meaningfully be addressed when they have been adequately recognised.

It has, of course, not only been feminists who have been arguing for this kind of approach. People working in the fields of post-colonial studies and ethnic politics have been re-thinking issues of identity in much the same way. In their case, there has been a move away from searching after some pure essential past of 'non Western' cultures which can be re-asserted in a claim to an identity which somehow exists/existed in spite of, or before, colonialism. In place of this there is a move towards a recognition, in part of the unrecoverability of a post-colonial identity and in part, and anyway, of the fact of the hybridity of *all* cultural identities. In other words, there is no original cultural essence which can be unearthed through a kind of

cultural archaeological dig. Rather, all cultures are cultures of contact, of mutual influence. The phrase has been coined that there has been a shift from 'roots' (essentialist authenticity) to 'routes' (how we got here, who we met, and how our identities were influenced, on the way). This does not mean that no specificity can be 'claimed'; rather it is that that very specificity is itself in part a product of contact, influence, and interconnection.

### **The identities of place**

All these arguments are very similar in the structures of both their critiques and their positive proposals to the arguments I would advance about the reconceptualisation of the identity of place. Thus, instead of seeing places through a lens of stable localisms, enclosed securities, with their 'own' characteristics somehow derived internally, as if from the soil, we should understand places as meeting places, as particular articulations of the social relations which constitute social space. This is place as open, porous, hybrid ... a global sense of place.

### **References**

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