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Society–Space

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Glossary

Fordism A system of mass production and consumption that originated with Henry Ford, and led to stabilization of wage relations, guarding against overproduction or underconsumption through state entitlements, regulation of trade agreements, and a culture of mass consumption.

Keynesianism A system of social entitlements that included unemployment insurance, health care, mother’s allowance, and welfare, originating with John Maynard Keynes and instituted after the Great Depression of the 1930s in many industrialized nations.

Neoliberalism A strategy of governance that attempts as much as possible to reduce a state’s responsibility for social entitlements and to download responsibilities for care onto cities, communities, families, and individuals.

Post-Fordism A globalized system of production and consumption characterized by the increasing use of robotics in production systems, externalizing uncertainties of the market to small-time suppliers who produce on demand (just in time), and the marketing of specialized goods to globalized “niches” of consumers.

Post-Structuralism A movement in French continental philosophy centered on the destabilization of claims to truth and variously connected to the anti-humanist rejection of a unified rational subject; a rejection of binary oppositions; and a view which sees knowledge as fluid, unstable, and discursively produced rather than ideological.

When figures as divergent as conservative British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and left leaning political philosopher, Ernesto Laclau, declare society is an “impossible object” we might ask—why investigate the relationship between society and space? The topic appears so vast that when properly charted—like Borges’ famous map drawn at a 1:1 scale—so much ground is covered as to become practically and analytically useless. Moreover, the relationship would seem a truism: societies create spaces that best express their needs; spaces in turn constrain or enable societal developments. But how we conceive of this relationship subtends any attempt to understand, critique, or transform, the social world. Our understanding of society–space, as a totality, determines the vantage point from which we understand the social world. It locates these delimited processes, both literally and analytically useless. Moreover, the relationship would seem a truism: societies create spaces that best express their needs; spaces in turn constrain or enable societal developments. But how we conceive of this relationship subtends any attempt to understand, critique, or transform, the social world. Our understanding of society–space, as a totality, determines the vantage point from which we understand the social world. It locates these delimited processes, both literally and figuratively, in relation to a social whole.

The first approach views society–space in terms of exploitative relations organized in a “structured coherence”—a social formation, whose territorial boundaries loosely approximate politico-juridical boundaries. Rooted in a Marxist vision of social inequity, whereby societal relations are defined by exploitation—alienated labor—its debates have focused on the logical primacy of particular unequal relations (classed, gendered, and racialized) and their attendant spatialities (workplace, home, underdeveloped neighborhoods, regions, and nations). The second approach sees society–space as a “strategic field”—constituted through productive relations of governance—an occupied zone in which struggles resemble the engagements of a war. Underpinned by philosophical approaches rooted in the work of Foucault, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Clausewitz, in this view, societies are organized through a constellation of discursive logics, enacted in everyday spaces, and through these practices the abnormal are contained, controlled, excluded, or policed. The third sees society–space as “performative field”, beginning with the premise that society is fundamentally unstable, its subjects perpetually hybridizing, caught in structured instabilities—in a social field that is conflictual and paradoxical. In the fourth approach, society–space is an “immanent field”, an expression of continuous differentiation, its subjects are unstable because they continuously transform themselves, engaging in acts of conjunction, connection, or collaboration with their milieu.

These four approaches share a recognition of persistent structural social inequities, a conviction that space is complicit in the production and possible transformation of these relationships, and the belief that one should not merely analyze societies but attempt to change them—to create a more equitable world.

Looking Backward: Overcoming Newton and Kant

The contemporary view is that the relationship between the spatial and social is an iterative one. This is by now so commonplace as to seem self-evident. However, this insight has only recently returned to geography after a long conceptual slumber in the seductive embrace of mathematical description. Mathematical approaches enabled a complex description of either social or spatial processes, but little theorization, and as David Harvey noted, no strategy at the interface between the spatial and the social. Geography’s
significant role in articulating of a concept of society and space, and the discipline’s part in a larger spatial turn in social theory can best be appreciated through a brief historical detour.

The mapping presented here attempts to be as comprehensive as possible, but does not exhaust the field. Other trajectories include systems-based, phenomenological, psychoanalytic, ethnomet hodological approaches, which are part of contemporary geographical investigation. There is, as well, a more complete archeology of influences on geography than addressed here, including the influences of Vidal de la Blache on geographical thought. The emphasis here, moreover, is on the changing status of the “spatial” in the society–space couplet. A shifting understanding of the social through the course of 20th-Century Continental and English-speaking geography is charted elsewhere by Philo and Söderstorm.

Early social theorists—the sociologist, Georg Simmel, and geographer, Freidrich Ratzel, for example, posited an iterative relation between society and space. Inspired by the rapidity of urban industrialization in the late 1800s, they counterposed rural existence to the distinctive qualities of urban life. Urban life, they theorized, became blended and compressed, a locus where anonymity encouraged nonconformity in thought. Apart from their theoretical insights, geography was for the most part, ruled by idiographic tendencies—detailed descriptions of specific places, which were useful for exploration, colonization, and conquest, but resistant to theoretical production.

By the 1940s normative and methodological impulses prompted a move away from even these early theorizations. Ratzel’s concept of Lebensraum was discredited through its appropriation by the Nazi party: a development that, perhaps, propelled German geography at the end of World War II back to the safe terrain of idiography and description. The rising methodological hegemony of quantitative approaches encouraged the revival of a Newtonian view of space as a container of social forms. Apart from their theoretical insights, geography was for the most part, ruled by idiographic tendencies—detailed descriptions of specific places, which were useful for exploration, colonization, and conquest, but resistant to theoretical production.

Social area analysis, which reached its zenith in post–World War II quantitative geography, viewed human societies as an aggregate of myriad individual decisions, which became routinized and achieved equilibrium in distinct spatial forms. Undergirding this approach was a neoclassical economic model of rational choice—perhaps suited to the economic and political stability following World War II, but ill equipped for what was to come afterward. By the late 1960s social unrest began to trouble the implied equilibrium of this framework. For Anglo-American geographers, including David Harvey, the “problem of the ghetto” remained resistant to quantitative explanations. Harvey’s Social Justice and the City was the first of a collection of transitional texts in geography, charting a course from the limitations of quantitative approaches to the possibilities of Marxism, setting a radical reorientation of human geography that has persisted to this day.

Society–Space as Structured Coherence

This is the first approach. The turn to Marxism in the late 1960s and early 1970s compensated for quantitative geography’s weaknesses: class analysis provided the tools to explain social inequity; the concept of dialectically induced crisis, propelled by the conflict between capital and labor, offered a mechanism of societal transformation. The deductive power of the dialectic, moreover, compensated for both the idiographic tendencies in descriptive accounts that characterized early work in geography and the agnostic politics of quantitative approaches that came after.

However, for geographers, Marxism came with additional challenges. Marx himself had tended to ignore space entirely or reduce it, as Soja noted, to Hegel’s notion of space as a state-idea, remaining within the “simplifying assumptions of a closed national economy”. With Marxism this attitude shifted from mere indifference to active hostility. Beginning with the Second International and writings of György Lukács (considered the founder of Western Marxism), attention to space was considered a fetish and diversion from class struggle. Under Stalinism, it was relegated along with culture and politics to the realm of superstructure, an irrelevant epiphenomenon.

Geographers countered this legacy with a frontal attack, arguing it was precisely the undertheorization of geography and space from Marx forward that had impoverished radical political theory and practice. Early debates in Marxist geography revolved around how far one could push the significance of space without risking spatial fetishism or subordinating class struggle—a social struggle—to a spatial one. Hyphenated Marxisms (feminist, antiracist, etc.) within geography were intent on challenging the explicit hierarchy of laboring forms within the Marxist framework. The latter privileged particular subjects (the white male Fordist worker) and their attendant spatialities (the factory in industrialized Western countries) as the linchpin of societal transformation.

From Spatial Fix to Socio-Spatial Dialectic

One line of enquiry reconceptualized the relationship between society–space: the “–”, if you will. Here concepts of spatial fix, time–space compression, social space, and the sociospatial dialectic, each charted a different course between the Scylla of ignoring space entirely, and the Charybdis of fetishizing it altogether.

Working perhaps most closely with Marx’s texts, David Harvey interrogated the role of space in the circuit of capital. For Harvey, space constituted a limit to the process of circulation—Harvey’s concept of spatial fix. However, technological developments in the labor process could also erode distances between places—time–space compression. Harvey’s concept of spatial fix unmasked the geographical and territorial dimensions of the concept of dead labor—labor invested in particular infrastructures and technologies
that weighed "heavily on the living"; time–space compression on the other hand expressed the manner in which capital transformed technologies (and the division of labor) to overcome this predicament, at the same time, annihilating fixed space with accelerated time. These two extremes of fixity and flight delimited the terrain of societal reform, and the extent to which surplus might be diverted from capital that was bound to a region, before it could leave.

It was one thing to argue that space could act as a break or an accelerant to the circulation of capital; it was quite another to propose a historical inversion in the relationship between capital and space. Lefebvre’s concept of social space—a counterpart to Marx’s concept of social labor—did just that. Space left the realm of covert strategy and was elevated to the status of necessity. Space was not merely a productive component of contemporary capitalism; capitalism was now produced, itself, by space. Working along multiple trajectories Lefebvre charted the geohistory of spaces. This he traced from the world of early human history organized primarily through natural spaces (in which natural features were discovered and exploited), to contemporary abstract spaces, wherein distinctions between places in the globe were erased and nature was subordinated to a grid of functions. In this vision, (inspired by Lefebvre’s own lifetime experience of the French state’s relentless modernization of its countryside), modernity and modernization were not emancipatory conditions, but rather an expression of a commodification tending toward barbarism. Modernization was a means by which capitalism ensured, by stealth, its survival. Social space raised questions about the centrality of class as the sine qua non of social transformation. The city was elevated from its status as a micro expression of larger socioeconomic processes to a central point of intervention. Social space reconceptualized the terrain of struggle: spilling out of the factory and on to the streets.

For some geographers, such as Harvey, this position bordered dangerously on a fetishizing of space; for others—Edward Soja in particular, it marked the return of space to its proper place in critical social theory after a century of its subordination.

Soja’s sociospatial dialectic took Lefebvre’s dialectical materialism, a dialectic no longer tied to temporality, as a point of departure. Drawing on Lefebvre’s argument that space was in some ways homological to class structure, expressing major contradictions and acting as a vehicle for societal transformation, he reassessed the latent spatiality of the work of Marxist theorists within the discipline and beyond.

The sociospatial dialectic neatly side-stepped the question of logical primacy in the society–space couplet. More provocative than the dialectic was Soja’s argument that the intersection of simultaneous synchronic sociospatial processes, emanating from multiple locales, took precedence over the diachronic, which viewed social change as a sequence of local developments unfolding in place. This viewpoint amplified a similar argument made by scholars of English literature (such as John Berger), that the linear narrative form of the novel had been superseded by a multiplicity of intersecting viewpoints. Although space and the social were iterative, in this view space now trumped time; geography trumped history.

Sociospatial Formations

Although these contributions addressed the role of space in the society–space couplet, they still begged the question as to how one bounded this concept. Where did one society begin and another end? The political implications were clear: one had to understand what "larger" processes must be considered in any study of social inequity in order to appraise the political field that might overdetermine it.

Marxists sought to rescue politics and culture from their status as epiphenomena and counter Stalin’s base-superstructure model by drawing on and extending Lenin’s and Marx’s concepts of the socioeconomic formation. The resulting conception of the social formation was understood as the complex articulation of social, economic, and political practices that together expressed a coherent society—a structured coherence, or totality of instances. Its boundaries were roughly congruent with national economies, but this scale reflected the hegemonic importance of national economies in the 1970s—today the European Union might be considered a social formation.

The sociospatial formation (introduced by South American radical theorist, Milton Santos, in collaboration with geographer, Dick Peet), marked the first tentative vision of active space, countering the Newtonian view that the nation-state was merely the container of relevant social, political, and economic processes. Space figured actively in both production and social reproduction. Santos’ inspiration for the concept came from a Hegelian understanding of things (as endowed with content and purpose), and practical observations about the role of modern planning infrastructures, which, in nonaligned South American economies at that time, acted as a means to attack and transform noncapitalist economies. Here the reorganization of space had preceded economic and political transformation as a mechanism of accelerated capitalist modernization.

The implicitly national agenda that underpinned early conceptions of the sociospatial formation reflected an unstated understanding that the national arena was central to any serious political agenda for societal transformation, and the vehicle from which to revive an international politics. The structured coherence of societies coalesced, logically, at the national level—a view reinforced by the centrality of the Keynesian welfare state during the Fordist period. The implication was that the nation-state itself was the target of any necessary change.

The demise of the Keynesian bargain, the differentiation of the economic fates of regions and cities, the rise of frontier zones, and the intensification of globalization were to erode this view—echoed in evolving debates about regional and urban specificity, the interpenetration of global and local, and finally, the salience of scale itself as a concept. At the same time theorists were beginning to grapple with the complexities of global–local relationships and their articulation in specific places. Doreen Massey’s concept of power geometries captured the differentiated nature of globalizing societal processes, which propelled jet-setting elites around...
the world with increasing ease, while confining the less fortunate to increasing immobility or distended travel times—long waits in bus lines to gain access to shopping centers, green grocers, and basic amenities to cover the bare necessities of life.

The Paradigmatic City

In the mid-1970s the national context so predominated as to provoke a debate around the specificity of the urban: not simply a microcosm of larger societal processes (within the structured coherence of a sociospatial formation), nor entirely its own separate reality. By the 1980s, however, the city not only asserted its own specificity: it was considered paradigmatic of a new social–spatial form. For Soja, Los Angeles undermined the underlying precepts of the structured coherence of the sociospatial formation and offered, in its place, the city as a global node in an urban hierarchy, defined by its relative position in a global network of cities.

This polycentric, post-Fordist agglomeration became the platform from which to theorize three interrelated restructurings of the society–space relationship: posthistoricism, that is the ascendancy of geographical over historical thought; post-Fordism, which was the shift from national economies of mass production and consumption to global economies that organized geographically dispersed labor pools, an international division of labor, and marketed to niches; and postmodernism, which admitted a cacophony of social subjects and processes into the arena of societal change. Some theorists considered this singular focus on Los Angeles a somewhat paradoxical maneuver—to declare a city as paradigmatic at the same time as it demonstrated spatial heterogeneity raised questions about the significance of other places.

Nevertheless, Postmodern Geographies was perhaps the most forceful elaboration of the thesis on the centrality of space in the society–space couplet and another key text marking a turning point in geographic thought. For feminist geographers, however, Soja’s recognition of cacophonous, differentiated voices had not gone far enough: a geography on the postmodern, to be sure, but written from a modern perspective. Although the book acknowledged the significance of a multiplicity of different voices, questions about the specificity of these differences awaited further investigation.

The view of society–space as a social–spatial formation has been the subject of two principle critiques. The first—against diffusionism—challenged the implied hierarchy between the First and Third World or developed and underdeveloped nations; the second—privileging social reproduction—challenged the primacy of subjects and spaces of production.

Against Diffusionism

Theorists working on underdevelopment, and later postcolonial studies, raised questions about the unstated Eurocentrism and diffusionism of many Marxist approaches, which presumed that societies, (nationally configured) were expected to follow the European model of modernization and transition to capitalism. C. L. R. James and the Caribbean school challenged the implied teleology of European development, arguing that slavery in Haiti provided the economic basis for the French Revolution. Geographers deepened this analysis. James Blaut’s The Colonizer’s Model of the World offered an extensive critique of the many manifestations of Eurocentrism and myths of diffusionism—which suggested that European models of society were the most highly developed forms, to be adopted over time by more backward societies.

Clyde Woods’ Development Arrested countered similar mythologies about the United States. The typical view was that societal development in the United States was led by a modernizing industrializing north, contrasted by an anachronistic form of economic and social development in the American south. Woods’ research documents the persistent underdevelopment of the Mississippi Delta, whose peoples and resources have been continuously plundered by plantation economies from the late 1600s on. The political and economic forms in the south, moreover, presage contemporary neoliberal strategies of dispossession.

Geographers have offered ways to conceptualize the resonances between processes of underdevelopment common to the First and Third World. Jim Blaut’s conception of the American ghetto as an internal neocolony has contemporary relevance to understanding the wanton neglect of infrastructures leading to the destruction of New Orleans. Katz’s concept of disintegrating developments links parallel processes of impoverishment in places as far flung as New York and Howa, recently documented in Growing up Global.

The full significance of these works, and the extent to which they demonstrate the complicity of slavery and nonindustrial forms of exploitation in the rise of capitalism and modernity—not just as precursors, but active laboratories, has yet to be fully appreciated. These works challenge the implied hierarchy of sociospatial development, symptomatic of a persistent colonial mindset, which suggests that only when countries have passed through specific stages of capitalist development might they be ripe for any kind of transformation.

Spaces of Social Reproduction

Feminist geographers opened a battle on two fronts—first to insist on a Marxism that did not consider gender issues and the production of labor power as derivative, but rather as central to social struggle, and second, to demonstrate the specificity of gendered spaces in this dynamic.

They were inspired by early work of radical feminists, and Torsten Haagerstrand’s insights on time geographies, which detailed the particular spatial patterns emerging from people’s daily journeys from home to work, shopping, school, and the like. The challenge initially was to document the difference that gender made. Feminists charted the gendered characteristics of capitalist space—from suburb to gentrified central city, the former badly serving women who had joined a secondary labor force by the
mid-1970s, and the latter reducing distance between home and work. The doubled roles of women as homemakers and as part of a paid labor force introduced its own spatial dynamics into the development of capitalism. For example, industry’s flight to the suburbs in the 1970s was as much to exploit a female labor force tied close to home as it was to flee organized unions in urban areas. The difficulties in advancing a feminist perspective in the early years should be underscored. Feminist geographies were sometimes castigated by established academics in the field, as being “not the stuff of geography”, but rather more like urban sociology.

Declining state responsibilities for services associated with social reproduction, the aggressive downloading of these responsibilities to cities, communities, and families that characterized the 1990s, all conspired to rework the scalar nesting of home, national, and international spaces in complex ways. Peripheralization at the core was one manifestation of this reworking, exemplified in the reorganization of home space with the transnational migration of childcare workers. Feminist geographers also began to unpack the ways that apparently local sites of social reproduction, from school classrooms to hospital birthing stations, supported national agendas.

Feminist geographers reworked the spatial imaginary along two axes. First, they argued for a shift from understanding social functions as operating in bounded quasi-territorial containers (the city, the nation-state) to a focus on nodes and flows of activities and practices (diasporas, transnational migrations). Second, they explored the disruption of the comfortable scalar nesting of practices: local, regional, and global were no longer thought of in terms of a kind of Russian doll set of containers; local practices might produce national or international effects; and inversions of all kinds were possible.

**Society–Space as a Strategic Field**

The second approach envisions society–space as a strategic field. The limits of the field are not political boundaries; the dispersal of particular institutional sites and technologies of rule that are constituted through them, map out the extensive space of the discursive regime—for example, the spread of asylums, prisons, or hospitals. Subjects are differentiated in terms of their relationship to societal determinations of normal and abnormal (e.g., the criminal, the insane). Foucault’s work is central to this approach, but it includes others interested in the societal production and regulation of transgressive subjects: how different societies define disability, sexuality, or aging, for example, becomes a means through which to understand how societal norms are constituted.

In this approach subjects (prisoners, pupils, soldiers, teachers, doctors, the ill, the insane, the priest, the penitent) are not defined by their alienated labor; they are produced through discursive logics about what is true and what is false, what is normal and what is abnormal—the rules of conduct governing conduct itself. These find expression in a variety of institutional mechanisms and practices to produce the norm and to curtail, contain, and exclude the abnormal (the school, the military, prison, the hospital).

Over the past decade geographers have been exploring the changes in discursive regimes arising in response to shifts in governance. With the rise of neoliberalism, states are increasingly interested in promoting right behaviors to limit collective costs (e.g., exercise and healthy eating to reduce healthcare costs). New categories of social exclusion—for example, the enemy noncombatant, or the illegal alien—place subjects outside of the range of entitlements afforded ordinary citizens and juridical protections decreed through international law. Space is being deployed in new ways as a technology of control, for example, through the banning of convicted drug users from certain parts of the city, and the demarcation of limited “zones of protest” as a space of free speech for demonstrators. Biotechnologies, such as the iris scanner, face-recognition technologies, thermal registers (deployed at airports during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic), form part of a range of new technologies of surveillance. ADDitionally—biopower—the politics of “life itself” has become a subject of governance as interest in the productive capacities of living matter (DNA, genetically modified organism (GMO)) raises regulatory questions and becomes part of the lexicon of governance of human populations. Campaigns around bioethical citizenship forge a link between people’s ability to act responsibly, to pursue the right lifestyle, and their ability to gain access to social services.

**Dispositif**

Within the strategic field, particular kinds of spaces (e.g., the school or the prison) become organizing and orienting mechanisms for a larger society—a dispositif, or underlying diagram of power relations. Theorists have argued for the iconic status of different spaces in different historical periods: for instance, Foucault suggested the school/prison/barracks expressed the logic of disciplinary societies and template for subject production in the modern era, whereas Agamben has argued that the concentration camp is a better signpost. The camp, for Agamben, marks the division between those included within the productive technologies of the state and those over which the state has absolute power, but who are reduced to bare life—states of exception. Agamben’s approach has become increasingly popular as we witness a growing range and variety of excluded individuals not subject to the protection of conventional laws (e.g., refugee populations, illegal migrant workers, unrecognized states, enemy combatants).

Within this approach, changes in the dispositif emerge genealogically—through accidents, adaptations, and improvisations, rather than through an internally driven logic (the unfolding of the dialectic characteristic of structured coherence). The discursive technologies that exclude or contain transgressive subjects can become the organizing principle for the entire social field. These iconic subjects and their corresponding spaces become a vantage point from which the underlying discursive logic of an entire society can be revealed, although in any given period, technologies may coexist, and strategies overlap, fuse, or evolve separately.

The concept of power in this approach draws on the philosophical heritage of Nietzsche and Clausewitz: it is nondialectical—opponents confront one another on a terrain much like a battlefield. Society is a strategic field of
engagement, in which each side defines the terms of conflict differently. Power focuses on relationships of governance rather than economic relations. Shifts in strategies of governance relate only opportunistically to economic changes: political and economic forces are not bound by a shared logic. Power is not defined through class relationships and then refracted through other forms. Power is productive: organized neither through ideology nor repression, (as Deleuze was to remark). Although power is dispersed—it is “everywhere”—it also takes specific forms at each site, something critics of Foucauldian analysis often neglect to acknowledge. It is expressed as a series of specific technologies of rule; passing ubiquitously through individuals as a relay—each one subordinated to and exercised by power in specific ways.

Historically, shifts in power relations express changes in state (and other institutions’) strategies of government: from the patrolling of boundaries of nation-states to guaranteeing internal security within the population. In class-based analyses the concept of population is often viewed as an obfuscation: here it becomes an object of rule. Governance of the daily conduct of subjects mitigates societal processes such as unemployment, migration, birth and death rates. Interests of governing elites are only tangentially linked to economic concerns. Although relations of power are negative to the extent they channel behaviors, they are also productive, rather than strictly repressive or ideological: subjects are not duped nor coerced, they are invested in their identities. Feminists have critiqued this viewpoint as reproducing the colonizer’s view of the colonized, unable to acknowledge the extent to which subjects are cognizant and critical of their subject positions, aware of their paradoxical position even as they participate in their production.

This approach emphasizes the optic and technical qualities of space: the space of the gaze, disciplinary spaces, spaces of surveillance, are organized in such a way as to enact particular discursive technologies. The uniform rows of desks in the classroom, for instance, allow for maximum observation by the teacher, and emphasize the uniform status of the pupil; the organization of the hospital according to specific illnesses allows for enclosure, partitioning, and creation of functional sites and the ranking of their uses.

Geographers have explored the limits and possibilities of this approach through investigations of its philosophical heritage. On the one hand, they have critiqued the unidimensional tendencies of this view of space, which merely reflects the discursive program that has organized them, inattentive to the multiple possibilities for redefining, challenging, and inverting relationships within them. Harvey and Thrift have each lamented this treatment of space as rigid and inanimate, rather than “lively”—the former arguing for a return to the dialectic, and the latter suggesting an appreciation of space that would be haptic, as well as optic. On the other hand, geographers have clarified philosophical influences within the approach. In Mapping the Present, Stuart Elden explores connections to Heideggerian and Cartesian views of space: as techne and extension. As techne, space is a technology expressing and enacting relations of power. As extension, institutions, and corresponding discursive arrangements, disperse across a social-spatial field, not limited by political boundaries—for example, schools, hospitals, and prisons have proliferated across Western nations. Power relations are enacted in a dispersal of institutional arrangements through space.

Civil society is thus thought of as an occupied zone, a battlefield. Localized practices are not understood as resonating within a larger societal field, a structured coherence of larger economic, political, and cultural processes. Instead societal discourses themselves, emerge through micro-geographies, the localized space of the school, the church, the barracks, the prison cell, the confessional. The interconnection, fusion, or coordination of their logics comes to express different discursive constellations whose variation marks a historical shift from one system of technologies of rule to another. This is a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, resonant with Nietzsche’s frog’s eye view of power relations. Different historical periods are distinguished by distinct dispositifs—diagrammatic relations of power, connections between discursive logics at different sites, which subvert the organization of society as a whole, and reflect how societies think about and organize the relationship between what is considered normal and abnormal.

**Genealogy’s Geography**

Geographers have also explored the relationship between genealogical transformations and their context, guarding against a totalizing view that sees new spaces and discursive technologies as simply steamrolled across an indifferent or accommodating landscape. In this account, variations in location, topography, and social environment are not simply relegated to the status of accident or contingency. Environment (geography, territory, already built form) figures in the genealogy of discourses as an active element in this process. One excellent example is Philo’s exploration of the geographies of madness. This rich account details the variation in therapeutic regimes in England and Wales—not simply imposed upon an indifferent landscape, but rather wrought from the Earth, an “original chaotic space”, a geographically differentiated brew of highway wanderings, sacred healing waters, and secluded forests and abbeys.

This reanimation of the geography of discourse has extended to an analysis of places of scientific knowledge production—the locales and networks, which were the sites of development of quantitative techniques for the analysis of population. Geographers have explored the spaces of exception that correspond to states of exception. Guantanamo Bay, the nonstate of Palestine, and the refugee camp have been figured as extraterritorial extrastate spaces. However, there are internalized states and spaces of exception as well, such as the workspace of transnational domestics who migrate to work in foreign lands without the benefit of local regulatory protections.

Critiques of the “strategic field” approach have focused on its tendency to view resistance as inseparable from the power structures that constitute their subjects; an indifference to the multiple subject positions that might confound an individual’s...
relationship to a particular discursive structure; and a resultant reluctance to explore the multiplicity of contested positions that might coexist in relation to a given discursive regime.

**Society–Space as Performative**

The third approach takes as its starting point the instability of multiple subject positions as a productive uncertainty—a performance or a becoming. Society is inherently unstable, improvisational, continuously differentiating. Its stability must be explained. The emphasis on marginality is neither simply exclusion—the Marxian view of the lumpen proletariat—nor subject production, the Foucauldian view. The spaces the marginal occupy are seen as performative, paradoxical, or cramped, expressing the ways they must knowingly negotiate their own subordinated positions within discursive constructs. These spaces become the vantage point from which to uncover blind spots in hegemonic discourse, or as de Lauretis put it “chinks and cracks in the power knowledge apparati.”

This perspective is subtended by an emphasis on radical instability and difference: there is no singular, privileged vantage point from which to understand society–space as a totality—rather this perspective reveals a range of heterogeneous spaces embodying different modalities of oppression and possibilities for resistance.

Subject positions are fundamentally unstable because subjects must negotiate between competing discursive frameworks. Subjects are not preexisting, autonomous entities that relate to one another across clearly defined boundaries. Subject identity is in a state of flux—emerging in the in-between space negotiated with others. Central to this project is the idea that the position of marginality is not simply one of exclusion: marginality offers a vantage point from which to critically appraise hegemonic relations of power. The political impetus for this approach has been to understand resistance to societal norms that might emanate from outside of hegemonic power relations, rather than simply reacting against them—something that Foucault and his adherents gesture toward but do not fully explore.

**Paradoxical Spaces**

For theorists working in this vein, inspiration has come from the conscious acts of negotiation or resistance by transgressive or marginalized subjects (e.g., the act of passing for white when black, or straight when gay or transgendered) and from social struggles that have set their own terms of reference and political objectives outside of the “normal” frame of negotiation. Exemplary in this regard is Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography*, and her concept of paradoxical space. Other geographers have extended her perspective to investigate phenomenon of passing. Griselda Pollock, a scholar of the arts, has undertaken a similar reassessment of spaces of modernity through analysis of impressionist paintings. For example, Morisot’s *On the Balcony*, is not viewed by Pollock as a masculinist vision of modernity, but rather a record of a white bourgeois woman’s experience of spatialized, gendered difference, marked by the distance between balcony, and street—semiprivate and public space. While the margin marks a site of exclusion, it is thus understood as a potential site of recuperation and resistance. Hooper and Soja deepen this line of argument, drawing upon bell hooks’ insights on the meaning of home for black women. They conceptualize the space that difference makes as a productive, counterhegemonic project.

As Caroline Desbiens notes, the question remains as to whether this space of resistance exists in a beyond (implying an as yet unrealized utopia) or an elsewhere, as sites of critical engagement that are part of the here and now, akin to the space-off in film (denoting the space offscreen). The idea that these spaces operate in the here and now has been forcefully demonstrated in McKittrick’s mobilization of paradoxical space in *Demonic Grounds*. Here she explores the range of micro-geographies that depict American slavery as intimately bound up in the constitution of modernity. For example, the auction block displayed a perverse rationality as a site of measurement of human worth. However, she also argues these spaces can afford possibilities for resistance. Thus a cramped attic space, which functioned for 7 years as a space of extreme confinement for an escaped slave was also a transit point to freedom. This approach invites a deeper exploration of politics through a range of spatialized concepts—third spaces, passing, transgression, border zones, a politics of location, “between-ness”, center-margin all come under scrutiny.

**Society–Space as Immanent Field**

The fourth and final approach shares much with the third, in that it sees instability as an endemic, persistent societal condition. This approach can be linked most strongly to post-structuralist feminist and Deleuzian influences. Where it differs from the third approach is that the instability of subject positions does not arise through a structured paradox. In this view society flows. The “lines of flight” or “becomings” of the subjects are the paths wrought by their perpetual improvisation—subjects, bodies are not bounded entities, containers, but rather “organizational arrangements” in a continual state of reaction to their milieu. These improvisations can become channeled into stable recurring relationships, or blocked, diverted, or even overthrown. Matter is, in this view, wayward—kinetic, dynamic—and systems arise through patterns of exchange, the coding of flows of matter (people, goods, sewage, water, microorganisms) within a milieu. Through this coding stable assemblages emerge.

Theorists working in this vein eschew Cartesian boundaries to think differently about configurations of space and subjects. Their work includes alternative conceptualizations of the flows, conjunctions, and convergences of processes in a world rendered increasingly complex through globalization, and a rethinking of configurations across traditionally conceived boundaries of human/nature, human/animal, human/machine, subjects/spaces. Longhurst and other feminist geographers, for example, have focused
on the affective and leaky qualities of bodies and other spatialized concepts of human subjectivity that belie the neat and bounded categorizations of Cartesian thought, suggesting that an approach open to the porosity and flexibility of subject production might also offer new kinds of alliances.

Others have focused on complexities of landscapes. Bonta’s study of Honduras, excerpted in Deleuze and Geophilosophy, explores a variety of practices that constitute its landscapes. He suggests that the point is not to disaggregate complex spaces into their constituent parts—“peasant and rancher, human from forest”—but rather to understand how spaces and subjects are increasingly “entangled”. These places do not constitute discretely bounded territories: they jostle one another at the edges, “beans taking over forest; forest taking over ranch land”. This process of becoming, the nomadism of space and subjects is central to this approach.

In this view of society–space as an immanent field, space is not strictly a techne, nor a juridico-political boundary, but the manifestation of process itself, a kind of becoming. Space is thus deteriorialized and reterritorialized; smoothed—in a process where relationships within a milieu are relatively free-form, determined only by one’s tactical position in relation to others; or striated—in a process whereby subjects’ capacities are invested through particular roles that they carry regardless of their location. This is a Leibnizian rather than Cartesian space: relational, enfolded, understood in terms of interfaces, interconnections, conjunctions, and interpellations. Even bodies themselves are not viewed as discrete bounded objects but rather a coding of the flows of heterogeneous materials, which confounds conventional notions of “inside” and “outside”. Indeed one might argue that in this view, the boundary between “space” and “subject” has dissolved. All of matter is viewed in terms of its active or expressive capacities, rather than reduced to its representational forms.

In social terms, assemblages channel desire and code activities into particular flows and pathways. These forms—the band, the state form, and the capitalist axiomatic—do not represent discrete historically distinct phases, but rather modus operandi that coexist and overlap. Subjects do not resist societal norms and inequities simply by reacting against structures: they draw on their own inspiration and creativity, ask their own questions, and formulate their own problems to conceive a more equitable world. Not to do so, risks remaining within the reference frame, channels, and codes, of the very structures one seeks to transform.

This view of resistance draws upon a concept of power that explicitly rejects Hegel’s (and Marx’s) resort to a negative dialectic—a dialectic whose movement is achieved exclusively through a reaction against intolerable conditions. It draws instead on Spinoza and Leibniz to rework concepts of power and space. Power is viewed as manifesting in two distinct forms: potestas—an alienating form of power which separates its subjects from their own capacities, and tends to be associated with feelings of melancholia and sadness; and potentia—or an emancipatory power which enhances subject’s capacities to act in their best interests, and tends to be associated with feelings of joy. It is this second form of power, which provides the impetus for societal transformation based on affirmation, on the positive (rather than the dialectical movement of the negative). One example of such is the wildcat strike of autoworkers in Turin, Italy in the 1970s. They refused a simple negotiation of better working conditions, rallying around the slogan “Volle Tutte”—We Want Everything! Another is the creative, inventive, and constantly evolving political agendas and practices of social movements around the globe in the late 1960s.

In this view, individuals must decide themselves whether a relationship expresses potentia or potestas—no one else can determine this for them. Space and subjects are not thought of solely in terms of their optic qualities—how subjects are organized in space, but their haptic qualities—the space of sensation, emotion, affect, which in turn help to constitute a normative, ethical basis for a politics.

The approach offers a different vantage point from which to understand societal transformations, or social movements (both negative and positive). Subjects can just as equally desire fascism as liberation. For example, in the rise of Nazi Germany the masses wanted to be led, they wanted fascism, a view expressed most strongly by Deleuze and Guattari. The point is to understand the basis of that desire, not simply assert that subjects have somehow been duped. Desiring production is a mechanism through which societies are constituted. The manner in which desire becomes channeled, blocked, or confounded with other objectives is central to this understanding of society–space.

Geographically inspired variants of this approach have concentrated at its antipodes. At one pole they have explored the constitution of the social in the interface between bodies and sensations. Post-structuralist feminist works and nonrepresentational geographies, the latter pioneered by Nigel Thrift, have investigated the affective and expressive, rather than representative dimensions of society and space. They begin with the body as a vantage point, and suggest new ways of approaching the political and the transformative, emphasizing the haptic—the sensory—dimensions of everyday life as a starting point from which social change begins. At the other pole, we find a Deleuzian reworking of complexity theory in the geocoding of flows of matter. The most provocative of these, perhaps, is Michael DeLand’s A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History. Although he is not a geographer, his work provides a provocative intersection of both geological and human activities, reinterpreting the last millennia through flows of geological, biological, and cultural–linguistic matter.

Arun Saldanha suggests one oversight of these applications (works of Bonta and others aside) is that the political questions of exploitation and the restrictive constitution of subjects are often overlooked—politics has been eviscerated, leaving us with a simple celebration of creativity, reformulated narrowly as cultural-commodity production, or wondering about the complexity of existence. One might argue, however, these explorations have attempted to extend the terrain of the political, and indeed there is much to suggest that research on bodywork and other engagements of affect might prove a potent avenue of enquiry. But clearly much work remains to be done on the ways in which flows and codings help to constitute institutions that enshrine state power, advance imperialism, and channel desire into frameworks that justify and perpetuate, rather than transform, social inequities. An investigation of this dimension of Deleuzo–Guattarian space remains firmly on the agenda.
Issues

Before the radical turn in geography some 30 years ago, David Harvey lamented the lack of strategy at the interface in quantitative geography—expressed in the inability of quantitative methods to reconcile social and spatial processes. In working through the four broad approaches outlined about, geographers have been adept at demonstrating the salience of space to social theory and restored its dynamism in the society–space couplet. In each of these approaches, geographers have offered analytical insights and new conceptual orientations toward space as a site of both research and praxis. At times they have built on or sharpened spatial concepts elaborated by theorists working outside the discipline and at times created their own, particularly where the salience of space had been ignored.

Space is indeed "back on the agenda". New chasms, however, have appeared in our thinking of social–spatial relations. The most pressing concern in contemporary human geography is how one might think of the interface between these competing visions of the subject and its attendant spatialities. It would be difficult to suggest that one of these approaches is more relevant than the others. In a world where the gap between rich and poor is, if anything, accelerating with attendant decline of cities and regions; where new and troubling forms of surveillance (with the introduction of biotechnologies) are coming into being; where new hybridized subjects are surfacing; and where desire is being mobilized to sustain affective regimes and intensified exploitative production, each of these approaches offers insights into contemporary societal transformations and social inequities.

These varied approaches are often characterized as irretrievably antagonistic, even in the face of evidence to the contrary in the original writings that they draw upon. Alternately they are combined, sometimes indiscriminately. Work needs to be done to explore their commonalities and differences more fully—to specify more carefully the complex terrain in which these diverse subjects are produced, and the particular configurations of society and space that sustain them. A new strategy at the interface is required, in order to be able to imagine different possibilities for life and work in a more equitable world.

See Also: Feminism/Feminist Geography; Fordism, Post-Fordism, and Flexible Specialization; Fordism; Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies.

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