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PLACE, SPACE AND THE PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF RIGA

METHODOLOGIES OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Often used interchangeably as literary synonyms to avoid repetition, 'place' and 'space' are yet distinctly different concepts in psychogeography. However, even so the two terms are often confused with one another due to their comparatively recent ascend to critical attention in spite of their longstanding topicality in the history of philosophy. According to John Agnew, 'Discussion of location/space, as opposed to place, is a modern concern […], dating at most from seventeenth century Europe, and associated with such intellectual giants as Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, and Kant' (2011: 8). The relations between place and space and their impact on psychogeography have always been connected with issues of power, time and identity. In order to clarify the two interlinked yet adversary notions of 'place' and 'space' in terms of this defining triangle, works by John Agnew, Jamaica Kinkaid, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Sigrid Weigel, and Nina Glick Schiller will be investigated as well as personal examples from psychogeography of Riga will be provided to illustrate the differences.

It seems that neither place nor space can be defined separately from one another and, similarly, it is difficult to assess the terms in relation to time, power or identity alone since the three dimensions determining the two geographical concepts often blend and contribute to the evolution of critical views. Yet philosophical opinions on place and space differ when regarding the predomination of one over the other. As J. Agnew observes,

> Subjectivists, emphasizing the subjective orientation of human actors in places that condition them, are usually Newtonian in their understanding of space and emphasize place, whereas objectivists, emphasizing the role of causal "forces" in human life, tend to a Leibnizian position and refer to location and spatial relations (2011: 9).

Consequently, though J. Agnew admits that neither of the two philosophical schools should be given a determined preference in assigning one of the terms a more active significance (ibid.), the tendency to partiality in emphasizing either space or place highlights the role of identity in shaping opinions about geographical notions, thus linking geography with individual and social psychology. According to J. Agnew, with E. S. Casey's reevaluation of 'space as place […] phenomenologically linking places to selves', place has gained a new meaning – that of 'taking place', i.e. happening, evolving over time and causing change, 'conditioning the various dimensions of selfhood, from the bodily to the psychological, institutional, and architectural' (ibid.: 13).

The question of identity in connection to place comes to the surface also in J. Kinkaid's *A Small Place* as a question of belonging – the ability to accept one's place of origin and use that space as a platform to build a place to call one's own in contrast to the eternal quest of tourists in search for an external paradise that should rather be found within. As J. Kinkaid writes,

> Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality
> and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad,
> is an attempt to forget it. Every native would like to find a way out, every
> native would like a tour (1988: 18).

This challenge of the soul to find its way, enjoying space by forming an identity that would not shatter with the waves of time, is what J. Agnew sees as the contrast between the two facets of the complex notion of place: firstly, the establishment of place as 'a particular or lived space' – a place with a location and identity thus 'specific' in contrast to the abstract generality of space (2011: 6), and, secondly, the absence of place due to 'an increasingly homogeneous and alienating sameness' (ibid.: 7). As J. Agnew indicates, 'Everywhere is increasingly alike as we all spend more of our time in non-places such as airport lounges, shopping malls and on the Internet, living lives increasingly without any sense of place whatsoever' (ibid.).

There seems to be no end to this universal malady of fluctuating and lost identities trapped in the intricate web of politicized time and space though W. Benjamin spoke of the grain of this modern disease already decades ago as the loss of aura, 'the unique phenomenon of a distance' that creates a sense of experiencing a miracle described by J. Kinkaid as the flavor of tourism – the chance to turn a space otherwise devoid of special meaning, veiled by daily routine, into a magical place to remember with pleasure (1988: 19). 'The desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly', which W. Benjamin names as the reason for 'the contemporary decay of the aura' (1936: 223) but might be likewise referred to the modern devaluation of place and its reduction to a nameless space, causes the boom of reproduction to substitute unique experience with 'transitoriness' through the media of 'picture magazines and newsreels' (ibid.), eventually resulting in the widespread feeling of 'placelessness'.

The frequent dissolution of place into an amorphous spatiality yet to be constructed into psychological harbors of place and hovering specters of shifting identities easily manipulable by political forces resonate with J. Baudrillard's definition of simulacra and simulations. According to J. Baudrillard,

> Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the
> concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a
> substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a
> hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It
> is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra
> – that engenders the territory (1981).

Likewise, J. Agnew reasons that 'places themselves are seen as simply incidental (if necessary) to more profound non-spatial processes such as class struggle, perceptual capacity and orientation, capital accumulation, or commodification' (2011: 12). So power relations

predetermine, shape and adjust the expanses of space, constructing modulated places to fit political and economic agendas and affecting both social and individual perceptions of psychogeography. As M. Foucault emphasizes, the history of spaces is interwoven with that of powers – 'from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations' (1980: 149). In a society where consumerism devours other values, marketing subtly influences subconscious decisions, embedding signals to consume in the architecture of space that manipulates identities by constructing a sense of belonging through shared goods or experience. Thus the void of space is turned into simulacra of personalized places attached to corporate identities. Due to their social and moral functions, places 'organize space into patterns of ideological meaning' (J. Agnew, 2011: 13).

Indivisible from political and psychological aspects, notions of place and space are also linked with the axis of time. According to J. Agnew, 'Place is the setting for social rootedness and landscape continuity. Location/space represents the transcending of the past by overcoming the rootedness of social relations and landscape in place through mobility and the increased similarity of everyday life from place to place' (2011: 8). As M. Foucault points out, ideological changes reflect in spatial reorganizations because only through the demolition of previous places 'the new political and moral order could […] be established' (1980: 153). Consequently, conflicting associations arise, connecting place with the backward direction of past versus the future oriented space (J. Agnew, 2011: 7). Through its temporal dimension, space adopts 'richness, fecundity, life, dialectic' assigned by M. Foucault to time, awakens from the state of 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile' (M. Foucault, 1980: 70) and forms ground for fostering new places and identities. So, in terms of time, space serves as a foundation for cultural narratives and, as S. Weigel indicates, plays an important role in 'cultural theory in the 20th century' since 'space is [a] common focus for philosophical (e.g. Cassirer), sociological (Simmel) and anthropological (Spengler) analysis of cultural configurations' (2009: 194) and is linked with discourse on colonial history (ibid.: 189).

N. Glick Schiller writes that 'the growth of global communications, media, consumerism, and public cultures that transcend borders' and 'the current restructuring of capitalism [are] knitting the world together' (1997: 155) therefore discussions of the concepts of space and place are inevitably connected with questions of transnational studies. The global powers, affecting local spaces, create a multi-cultural and multi-national picture, forming identities through social interaction and psychological impressions in different places. With the ever increasing role of globalization, issues on borders have become central to many states. According to N. Glick Schiller, 'while borders may be cultural constructions, they are

constructions that are backed by force of law, economic and political power, and regulating and regularizing institutions. […] Moreover, […] the experience of observing and crossing borders is gendered' (ibid.: 159) because women are tied to the borders of home (ibid.: 157). But being a global citizen means to reconsider national and household boundaries. Even if 'most natives in the world […] are too poor to go anywhere […] to escape the reality of their lives [or] live properly in the place where they live' (J. Kinkaid, 1988: 18-9), the space they inhabit is transformed by international forces, including foreign investors and visiting tourists. With the span of time and mingling of people of different origins, even ethnicity is a part of identity that leaves one's place of belonging an open question.

So, though at first the concepts of place and space might seem clear and simple, their relation to the formation of identity, central in human life, illuminates inseparable, complex connections of space and place with issues of time and power: the underlying global plot of political ideologies and economic stratagems which create localized simulacra experiences, manipulate spatial and psychological borders and, in the era of cultural transnationalism, affect individual sense of belonging not only in terms of social groups and geographical places but to the level of rethinking one's ethnic roots. As J. Agnew reminds, 'it is […] from within places that the wider world is constructed. Indeed, what we understand by "space" emerges from the practices of philosophers, cartographers, scientists, and a host of others in their particular offices, homes, workplaces and laboratories' (2011: 27). Living and learning thus becomes a process of molding abstract space into meaningful places to be remodeled with personal growth and remembered as landmarks of both private and social history.

My psychogeography of Riga as a space to be filled with memories and a place to live in and call one's own provides plenty of examples of shifts and nuances of meaning of the two important notions. As a child born and raised in the city center, Riga associated to me with the pretty houses of Art Nouveau and the winding streets of the Old Town whereas the other districts built during the Soviet times remained for a long time a vague and blurred space beyond the map of my territory of daily walks through the city parks. Due to personal family history, since the very beginning of my life the open spaces and public places have become more home to me than the various apartments my body slept in. With time, as I learnt to read the story of urban semiotics, Riga became my mirror friend in whose face the lines of my biography intertwined with reflections of and on social history, different political periods and transnational experiences. Several places and occupation of spaces, however, have left deeper imprints in my memory.

When I was three, I was naturally oblivious to national and political symbols, too young to know that the city grows, in spite of its solid concrete and brick walls, just like a child does.

Back then, in about 1988, one of the special places I loved to stop by on my way from a park to park, was the place with red pebbles, which were so many that I mostly managed to smuggle some home. That the pool of pebbles surrounded a grand looking stone man did not matter – there were many sculptures and monuments in my Riga and this did not even look particularly handsome and had a somewhat ominous air, perhaps due to the considerable height. Granny, though, minded the monument more: I was to learn that Lenin is to be revered and that the place of his monument (The place of my pebbles!) is not a playground. It can be imagined therefore how glad I was to know a few years later that the ugly man had been removed, sadly though – together with the pebbles for nowhere else could I find red ones in such plenty. Of course, the red was Soviet red and that is why adults hated the sight of those stones; it was the change of political regimes that changed my place and made grown-ups rejoice, not my child's feeling of petty revenge granted by some divine hand.

With time, other places including those I had not previously even had an idea of altered, too. In a vast space definitely outside of the boundaries of my Riga but within the borders of the city, LIDO Recreation Center was constructed to become a favorite place for families and tourists. New shopping malls were built in every district much like those I had marveled about on my trips abroad and everyone seemed to swarm there for a free parking lot was always hard to find. Riga changed and so did customs of weekend traditions. All of a sudden, money and consumption began to play a major role in family satisfaction, substituting storytelling and hours long walks trying to read the tales of the city. Riga was no longer Soviet, its image became ever more international, brand names from all over the world addressing passersby in a multitude of languages colored its face with a transnational make-up. The new age of the World Wide Web began and geographical space shrank into nothingness as places of interest could be connected to in mere instants, ever more hours were to be spent in the nowhere land of computers, hunting down information and ideas. Old buildings were torn down and trees cut to give way to new roads, bridges, modern apartment houses, business centers and the National Library. Even the parks I knew as a child have not remained the same. New playgrounds have been installed, some paths have been restructured, a monument or sculpture has been added here and there.

But my places, the places I can call my own and feel I belong to have never changed though their number has grown. They are the squares and routes I have traced while living at particular addresses because they are colored with memories of conversations with friends and the streets, which know so many stories. They are the parks where I can meet flowers and trees which I need wherever I live, perhaps because of the flower garden my grandmother used to keep. They are the schools and the faculty which shaped my identity. Yet, one of the most

special places in Riga is a particular bench on the brink of the city canal, the place where I realized for the first time in my early teens that everything around me is a construct – architectural, cultural, social, economic and political, that space is designed into places for definite purposes, and that to be myself there, instead of merely fitting into the simulacrum picture, to have the feeling of true belonging I must learn to reread the city I thought I knew.

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