In Place/Out of Place

Geography, Ideology, and Transgression

Tim Cresswell

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

Chapter 1

Introduction

> *In the case of ideologies of what is good and right it may be space rather than time that is crucial. Something may be good and just everywhere, somewhere, here or elsewhere.*
> —*Goren Therborn, 1980*[1]

There are many instances in our everyday existence when we use the word *place*. On some occasions we use it to refer to a building or a location—a rendezvous or site of significance. On other occasions the word *place* turns up in common phrases such as "a place for everything and everything in its place" or "know your place" or "she was put in her place." In these expressions the word *place* clearly refers to something more than a spatial referent. Implied in these terms is a sense of the proper. Something or someone *belongs* in one place and not in another. What one's place is, is clearly related to one's relation to others. In a business it is not the secretary's place to sit at the boss's desk, or the janitor's place to look through the secretary's desk. There is nothing logical about such observations; neither are they necessarily rules or laws. Rather they are *expectations* about behavior that relate a position in a social structure to actions in space. In this sense "place" combines the spatial with the social—it is "social space."[2] Insofar as these expectations serve the interests of those at the top of social hierarchies, they can be described as ideological.[3] The example of the business can be extended to society as a whole. Just as the business has a social hierarchy, society has levels of power and influence related to class, gender, race, sexuality, age, and a host of other variables. Similarly, the building in which the business is located has spatial divisions, and the world outside is divided up into segments—houses, streets, public places, libraries, shops, and so on. Just as in the business, there are expectations about behavior in these places that are related to positions in the social structure. Many of these expectations are written into law. Most, however, remain unstated and taken for granted.

In this book I examine the basis for expressions such as "everything in its place." I argue that expectations about behavior in place are important components in the construction, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values. In order to illustrate this argument I examine reactions to three events that upset expectations about place and behavior. First, however, it is helpful to provide some brief illustrations for the more theoretical sections of the book.

"True" Stories

In the early 1980s thousands of homeless people appeared on the streets of New York City—in parks like Tompkin's Square, on the sidewalks of Fifth Avenue, and on the floor of Grand Central Station. The majority of these people were trying to survive, to eat and sleep and find shelter—the basic conditions of survival. In general they were not organized into a movement of resistance. The act of sleeping on the floor of a railroad station or defecating on the sidewalk outside million-dollar apartments was not, I would surmise, an act of intentional resistance. Most of the homeless people would not think twice about swapping places with those inside the apartments. Homelessness is not, in general, a political movement; it is reasonable to assume that most of the actions of homeless people are simply strategies of survival.

The mayor of New York at the time, Ed Koch, was upset by homelessness—it did not fit into his image of a wealthy and improving metropolis. He was particularly disturbed by the sight of homeless people in the fine, grand railroad station where people left and entered the city. His reaction was to introduce an "anti-loitering" law under which police would have powers to remove the homeless from public spaces. The State Supreme Court of New York overturned the law.

Mayor Koch's reaction to this was to appeal to "common sense" in a speech to the American Institute of Architects discussing the subject of "art in architecture." In the answer to a question at the end of the speech Koch reminded the architects of the presence of homeless people in Grand Central Station:

> These homeless people, you can tell who they are. They're sitting on the floor, occasionally defecating, urinating, talking to themselves ... We thought it would be reasonable for the authorities to say, "you can't stay here unless you're here for transportation." Reasonable, rational people would come to that conclusion, right? Not the Court of Appeals.[4]

Rosalyn Deutsche suggests that having been denied *repressive* powers, Koch resorts to *ideological* ones by declaring that reasonable people would know that a railroad station is for traveling and not for urinating. This is stated as though it were transparent, obvious—what all people think—a truism that benefits all people. I can certainly imagine readers nodding their heads in agreement. Of course train stations are meant for travel!

There are, however, a great number of other behaviors "appropriate" for Grand Central Station. People use it as a meeting place and as a place to eat. Architecture students may walk around it simply to admire its cathedral-like construction and decoration. Artists might even erect an easel in the station and paint the rush-hour crowds against the majestic background of the station. Husbands buy their wives flowers there. None of these activities count as travel. They are all, however, "acceptable." In making his ideological case, Koch resorts to defining the "proper" use of a place. In doing so he exploits the "naturalness" of the social geographical environment.

By concentrating on the apparent discrepancy between the behavior of homeless people and the demands of a place like Grand Central Station, Koch takes the station out of a context—the context of New York in the 1980s. Homelessness is treated as an instance of people out of place, dislocated from the urban politics and economics of New York. At the same time as urban "development" creates more and more homeless people, Koch denies the homeless any right to the public spaces of the city. By divorcing the homeless issue from a wider context and referring instead to a single place, he removes the issue from the realm of the social and the political and simply asserts the out-of-place nature of the homeless.[5] Indeed nothing could seem more natural. It is this naturalness of the environment that makes it so useful in defining what is and what is not "the right thing to do." Here geography and ideology intersect.

On 20 December 1986, early in the morning, a car driven by three black men stalled on a major road in Queens, New York. Not knowing how to remedy the situation, the three men walked into the nearby Howard Beach neighborhood and ordered a pizza. Within a few hours the three men had been chased three miles. One was killed by a car as he tried to cross a highway to escape the eight white attackers. Another became blind in one eye from the continuous beating he received during the three-mile chase. Even before the three men were confronted by the eight white men, an anonymous caller had informed the police of the presence of troublemakers. The police had arrived at the pizzeria and found no signs of trouble—just three black men having a pizza.

During the investigation that followed, surprisingly little attention was paid to the motivations behind the brutality that had been inflicted

on the three men. The most persistent line of questioning was, "Why were the three black men in Howard Beach if they weren't causing trouble?" The attention was on the place of the assault rather than the assaulters. Patricia Williams remarks that this emphasis was the result of a constant stream of statements from defense lawyers and Howard Beach residents that indicated that the mere presence of the three men in that particular place was good enough reason to drive them out.[6] A *New York Times* article reported the following:

> The [defense] lawyers questioned why the victims walked all the way to the pizza parlor if, as they said, their mission was to summon help for their car, which broke down three miles away.... At the arraignment, the lawyers said the victims passed two all-night gas stations and several other pizza shops before they reached the one they entered.[7]

The story goes on to report how many working telephones there were between the car and the pizza joint. Williams wonders why this is of any relevance to the issue of the brutal assault. The fact was that no trouble had been caused. Neither was there any reason for the white people to believe that the black people were going to cause trouble. The clear suggestion was that the black men were out of place—that they did not belong—that the laws of place itself were being violated. The "trouble" caused by the three men was purely a transgression of expectations—expectations concerning where black people do and do not belong.

Two cases of brutal rape that received considerable media attention in recent years are worth comparing. One is the case of a woman gang-raped in a Massachusetts barroom on a pool table.[8] The other is the rape of a white woman jogger by a group of black boys in Central Park. The woman raped in the barroom was a white working-class woman. The rapists were also white and working-class. In the Central Park case the woman was white and affluent while the attackers were black and poor. Both cases involved incredible violence. In the barroom case the media story gradually centered on a fascination with the location of the event. The question (sometimes explicit, often implicit) was, "What was a single woman doing in a barroom?"—the implication being that she must have been looking for sexual favors, that she got what she was looking for. In the Central Park jogger case the media reports used the place of the event in a different way. The public nature of Central Park was emphasized. The rape was more horrific because it occurred in Central Park—it could have happened to anyone. The barroom case clearly reflects the Howard Beach case, as attention gradually turned to the site of the event and the supposed implications of particular types of persons (black man, single woman) being in places they do not belong. No one suggested that the Central Park jogger was out of place. All attention was on the brutality of the (poor and black) attackers.

A man walks into a restaurant in Argentina and declares in a loud voice, "I'm hungry and would like a meal without wine or dessert." The waiter finds him a table and brings him a beefsteak and potatoes. The man eats them and expresses his satisfaction. The waiter brings him a check and the man produces an identity card and shows it to the other diners before signing his name on the bill. He then recites a recently passed Argentinian law that states: "No Argentine shall go hungry. An Argentine is entitled to a meal, so long as it does not include liquor or dessert." "But who pays?" the waiter protests. The man shrugs his shoulders and confesses his ignorance in this matter. After some argument the manager threatens to call the police and another diner gets up, says he is a lawyer and wishes to defend the man. By this point the other diners in the restaurant are arguing about the fairness of the law. Eventually a third man offers to pay the bill and the dispute is settled.[9]

This event seemed like a strange episode in an otherwise normal meal to the diners and staff of the restaurant. In fact they were witnessing "invisible theater." The three men were all actors involved in propaganda theater under the tutelage of Augusto Boal—the Brazilian creator of the "theater of the oppressed." The diners did not know that they were an audience, as the actors never revealed themselves as such. By conducting theater in this way they turn the audience into "Spect-actors." The creation of the scene led to the involvement of the restaurant-goers in a way that standard theater—in its proper place and time—cannot. The theater was "invisible" because the normal context of theater was not present. In addition there was no clear distinction between actors and audience so the spect-actors could not distance themselves from the proceedings. The actions of the man who refused to pay were actions "out of place" in that they constituted behavior that deviates from the established norms of restaurant ritual. Theaters and restaurants are specialized places that demand appropriate behavior. By behaving out of place the actor drew attention to the function of the restaurant and to the legitimacy of a law. By jarring the diners out of their everyday expectations the actor forced them to confront a political issue that would otherwise have been far from their minds.

The apparently commonsensical notion of "out-of-place" plays a clear role in the interpretations of particular events. In many instances these interpretations have intensely political implications. Mayor Koch and the defense lawyers in the Howard Beach case manipulate the properties of

place to make ideological and political arguments. They use the taken-for-granted aspects of place to turn attention away from a social problem (homelessness, racism) and reframe a question in terms of the quality of a particular place. Never mind the growing problem of homelessness in New York, people shouldn't sleep in stations. Never mind the racism of a group of white men whose actions resulted in the death of a black man—why was the man in Howard Beach? The same switch from wide social issues to questions about place occurs in the barroom rape case.

But the effect of place is not simply a geographical matter. It always intersects with sociocultural expectations. This is evidenced by the Central Park case. Here the place of the attack serves to underline the horror of the attack. During the same day on which the white woman was attacked in Central Park a black woman was raped in her own home and eventually thrown off a high roof and killed. The attacker was also black. The event was almost unreported. The victim was not white or wealthy and the attack occurred in her own private place.

In this book I use three in-depth stories to illustrate the relationships between place and sociocultural power. I have chosen to look at events that transgress the expectations of place. In each illustration we will see this general situation repeated. A particular set of places and spaces exists, an event occurs that is judged by some "authority" to be bad, and that authority connects a particular place with a particular meaning to strengthen an ideological position. These events are referred to here as *transgression*. The first illustration is the example of reactions to graffiti in New York City during the 1970s; the second is the outcry surrounding the attempt of a convoy of travelers and young people to hold a free music festival at Stonehenge during the summer solstice every year throughout the 1980s; the third is the case of the establishment's condemnation of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp through the early 1980s.

Central Themes

There are two connected central themes that run throughout this book. The first is the way in which space and place are used to structure a normative landscape—the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place. Something may be appropriate here but not there. The effect of spatial structures on what is deemed appropriate is dealt with in some depth by Pierre Bourdieu in his study of the Kabyle.[10] He shows how certain orderings of space provide a structure for experience and help to tell us who we are in society. He writes, "The spatial structures structure not only the group's representation of the world but the group itself, which orders itself in accordance with this representation." He goes on to suggest that it is through "the dialectical relationship between the body and a structured organization of space and time that common practices and representations are determined."[11]

Spatial structures structure representations of the world as they are held in a taken-for-granted way. But value and meaning are not inherent in any space or place—indeed they must be created, reproduced, and defended from heresy. It is exactly this process that I illustrate. In the first half of the conclusion I return to this theme and suggest that the fundamental human experience of the world *as* the world—a set of places—gives geography a fundamental role in ascribing particular sets of values to particular actions. The geographical setting of actions plays a central role in defining our judgment of whether actions are good or bad.

The second theme is that of transgression. Just as it is the case that space and place are used to structure a normative world, they are also used (intentionally or otherwise) to question that normative world. There has been a great deal of discussion about marginality, resistance, and the construction of difference recently. Here I wish to delineate the construction of otherness through a spatially sensitive analysis of transgression. Transgression, I shall argue, serves to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space and place, and thus the margins can tell us something about "normality." I am also interested in thinking through the implications of transgression as a form of politics.

In each of the illustrations that form the body of the book the twin themes of normative geographies and transgression interplay to raise questions about each other. To summarize, there are two processes at work: the discursive attempt to create and maintain normative geographies (where everything is in place) through and by the media and, second, the effect of place on the interpreted meanings of transgressive actions. The media reaction to a perceived transgression (such as homeless people in Grand Central Station), then, is affecting place through its discourse at the same time as this discourse is affected by the already existing meanings of place (the idea that Grand Central Station is not for sleeping in).

A Method

How, then, can we interpret the connection between commonsense assumptions about place and normative judgments of behavior? We can hypothesize the existence of a set of commonsense assumptions about appropriate behavior that is heavily determined by the qualities of particular places serving as experiential contexts for behavior. We also know

that there is not, in everyday life, a direct correlation between place and appropriate behavior. That is to say we cannot take a place such as a corner on Main Street and list all the activities that would be appropriate there. In fact our consciousness of place all but disappears when it appears to be working well. My approach is to examine situations where things appear to be wrong, those times when we become aware of our immediate environment—when the heating fails or the lights go out. We rarely sit and think of a working electric light. The light's failure to work when we are reading a book, however, leads to an instant and heightened awareness of the particular place we are in.

One way to illustrate the relation between place and behavior is to look at those behaviors that are judged as inappropriate in a particular location—literally as actions out of place. It is when such actions occur, I argue, that the everyday, commonsense relationships between place and behavior become obvious and underlined. The labeling of actions as inappropriate in the context of a particular place serves as evidence for the always already existing normative geography. In other words, transgressive acts prompt reactions that reveal that which was previously considered natural and commonsense. The moment of transgression marks the shift from the unspoken unquestioned power of place over taken-for-granted behavior to an official orthodoxy concerning what is proper as opposed to what is not proper—that which is in place to that which is out of place.

Clearly different groups of people have different ideas about what is and is not appropriate, and these different ideas get translated into different normative geographies. The stories I presented earlier illustrate this point well. It is when different spatial ideologies come into conflict that they are taken out of the role of "common sense" and are stated as "the right way"—the "orthodoxy." It is at this point, when different cultural values clash, that normative geographies are defined by those with the power to do so. This process of reaction and definition in the media and elsewhere constitutes a rich source of evidence for the normally unstated relations between place and ideology.