



- 1.1 About this book
- 1.2 Space and society
- 1.3 Boundaries and connections
- 1.4 Using this book

■ 1.1 About this book

Social geography is an inherently ambiguous and eclectic field of research and writing. It is perhaps best summed up as ‘the study of social relations and the spatial structures that underpin those relations’ (Johnston *et al.* 2000: 753). While social geography’s intellectual roots can be traced back to the nineteenth-century French school of ‘*la géographie humaine*’, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that it developed rapidly as a subdiscipline. It was in this period of social and political turbulence, when civil rights protests were at their height, that social geography came into its own. Informed by the development of Marxist and feminist approaches, social geography engaged with social inequalities and questions of social justice (Harvey 1973). Subsequently, in the late 1980s and 1990s this subdiscipline was influenced by the ‘cultural turn’ in geography, leading to a shift in emphasis away from issues of structural inequality towards one of identity, meanings, representation and so on. It is therefore increasingly difficult to distinguish between social geography and cultural geography.

Although this book is entitled *Social Geographies*, it makes no claims to occupy a discrete intellectual space which can be identified or sealed off from other traditional subdisciplinary areas such as cultural geography or political geography. Rather, the plural social geographies which emerge here are a porous product – an expression of the many connections and interrelationships that exist between different fields of geographical inquiry. Indeed, they are perhaps more appropriately characterized by the subtitle: *space and society*.

Given the intellectual heritage of the 1960s and 1970s, social issues such as poverty, housing and crime, rather than spaces, have commonly provided the structuring

framework for social geography textbooks, with social identities such as gender, race, sexuality and disability each discussed within discrete chapters. Instead of replicating this format, this book adopts geographical scale as an organizing device to think about how social identities and relations are constituted in and through different spaces. Through this device it both addresses conventional social geography topics such as urban social segregation, class, fear of crime and so on, while also making more explicit the ways in which social relations and space are mutually constituted.

This chapter sets the scene for what follows by briefly outlining the ways in which geographers have conceptualized space and society, by explaining how 'scale' is employed in this text, and by offering some guidelines as to how this book might be read and used.

■ 1.2 Space and society

Space is a central organizing concept within geography. As the discipline developed in the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the ways in which geographers have conceptualized space have become increasingly sophisticated.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries geography was concerned with the identification and description of the earth's surface. Space was conceived by explorers, cartographers, and geographers as something to be investigated, mapped and classified (a process enhanced by the development of instrumental, mathematical and graphical techniques). Indeed, this understanding of space underpinned the subjugation and exploitation of territories and populations through the process of colonialism.

After the Second World War a recognition of the deficiencies of regional geography and the need for more systematic approaches to research, combined with geographers' increasing engagement with quantitative methods, led to a shift in the focus of the discipline. The emphasis on the description of uniqueness was replaced by a concern with similarity. Specifically, positivist approaches to geography were concerned with uncovering universal spatial laws in order to understand the way the world worked. The focus was on spatial order and the use of quantitative methods to explain and predict human patterns of behaviour (Johnston 1991, Unwin 1992).

Within social geography attempts were made to understand the complexity of society and social relations by mapping and exploring spatial patterns. The emphasis was on scientific techniques such as social area analysis which used key variables (e.g. about occupation, ethnicity, etc) from the census to describe the characteristics of social areas; and factorial ecology which involved the uses of multivariate statistical techniques to produce areal classifications. These, and other such methods, were used to map patterns of urban social segregation, most notably of racial segregation. In other words, social differences were understood in terms of spatial separation. Some of this work and its legacy for the study of social geography is discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 7.

Within this explanatory framework space was conceptualized as an objective physical surface with specific fixed characteristics upon which social identities and categories were mapped out. Space was, in effect, understood as the container of social relations and events. Likewise, social identities and categories were also taken for granted as 'fixed' and mutually exclusive. The emphasis on understanding social relations in terms of the way they were mapped out in space also meant that those social relations (such as gender and sexuality) that were not easily studied within this spatial framework were overlooked (Smith 1999).

In the 1970s this positivist approach to human geography was subject to many-stranded critiques, of which **humanistic** geography and **radical** geography were two. Their focus on the theoretical and methodological limitations of positivism (see Cloke *et al.* 1991) also drew attention to the dualistic way in which society and space were conceptualized in this approach. Humanistic geography, for example, 'rejected the exclusivity and pretensions to objectivity of positivist science, and proposed the importance of subjective modes of knowing. Geographical space was not simply an objective structure but a social experience imbued with interwoven layers of social meaning . . . In humanistic geography "social space", not physical or objective space, was made the object of inquiry' (Smith 1990: 76). Radical approaches, most notably those inspired by **Marxism**, sought to understand space as the product of social forces, observing that different societies use and organize space in different ways; and to explain the processes through which social differences become spatial patterns of inequalities (Smith 1990). In turn, geography's subsequent engagement with **postmodernism** also produced a new sensitivity to 'the myriad variations that exist between the many "sorts" of human beings studied by human geographers – the variations between women and men, between social classes, between ethnic groups, between human groups defined on all manner of criteria – and to recognise (and in some ways represent) the very different inputs and experiences these diverse populations have into, and of, "socio-spatial" processes' (Cloke *et al.* 1991: 171).

Against this philosophical backdrop understandings of space and society have been reassessed. Social categories (such as class, gender, sexuality and race) are no longer taken for granted as given or fixed but rather are understood to be socially constructed. As such they can also be contested, resisted and (re)negotiated. These ideas are central to much of the work discussed throughout this book. For example, see Chapter 2, sections 2.2.2, 2.6.1 and 2.7, and Chapter 7, section 7.2.1. These sections show that 'gender', 'age', 'disability' and 'race' are social constructions rather than 'natural' or biologically given differences. Further, identities are now understood as always relational in that they are constructed in terms of their sameness to, and difference from 'others'. For example, Chapter 2 examines how 'man' and 'woman' are defined reciprocally, while Chapter 9 draws on the work of Edward Said (1978), in which he shows how 'the Orient' as a social and cultural construction has provided Europeans with a sense both of 'Otherness' and of 'Self', to demonstrate how national identities are often defined not on the basis of their own intrinsic properties but in terms of what they are not. In such writings the 'Other'

is simultaneously understood as desirable, ‘exotic’ and fascinating while also provoking emotions of fear and dread. In this way, the concept of otherness has helped geographers to understand why and how particular bodies such as the disabled, the homeless, those with mental ill-health and so on, are socially and spatially excluded (see, for example, Chapter 2 and Chapter 6).

However, geographers have also come under criticism for their tendency to focus on, and often to appropriate, the experiences of ‘others’ rather than to examine privileged and powerful identities. Derek Gregory (1994: 205), for example, questions ‘By what right and on whose authority does one claim to speak for those “others”? On whose terms is a space created in which “they” are called upon to speak? How are they (and we) interpellated?’ Such questions about **positionality** have in turn stimulated new interest in **hegemonic** identities such as whiteness (see, for example, Chapter 2, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8), masculinity (Chapter 2) and heterosexuality (Chapter 3 and Chapter 7). At the same time geographers have also woken up to the fact that class, race, sexuality, and disability cannot be examined in isolation – rather, individuals and groups have multiple identities, occupying positions along many separate lines of difference at the same time; indeed, people’s identities also develop in between the boundaries of social categories such as black and white (see, for example, Chapter 7, section 7.2.1). These ‘old’ fixed categories and identities can be, and are being, displaced by new forms of social identification – or hybrid identities – in which difference is no longer viewed in terms of social and cultural hierarchies.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a performance – outlined in Chapter 2 – has played a particularly important part in shaping geographers’ understandings of the production of identities. She rejects the notion that biology is a bedrock which underlies social categories such as gender. Rather, she theorizes gender (and implicitly other identities too) as performative, arguing that ‘gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (Butler 1990: 33). This approach has helped geographers to think about social identities as permanently contested and unstable categories and has inspired work that looks at how such performances and contests take place in lived space (see, for example, Chapter 5).

Just as social identities are no longer regarded as fixed categories but are understood as multiple, contested and fluid, so too space is no longer understood as having particular fixed characteristics. Nor is it regarded as being merely a backdrop for social relations, a pre-existing terrain which exists outside of, or frames everyday life. Rather, space is understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities; and social identities, meanings and relations are recognized as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces. Thus Doreen Massey (1999: 283) explains that space ‘is the product of the intricacies and the complexities, the interlockings and the non-interlockings, of relations from the unimaginably cosmic to the intimately tiny. And precisely because it is the product of relations,

relations which are active practices, material and embedded, practices which have to be carried out, space is always in a process of becoming. It is always being made.'

Each chapter of this book focuses on how a space, from the body to the nation, is invested with certain meanings, how these meanings shape the way these spaces are produced and used, and, in turn, how the use of these spaces can feed back into shaping the way in which people categorize others and identify themselves. In other words, space and society do not merely interact with or reflect each other but rather are mutually constituted. To give an example from Chapter 7, lesbian and gay sexualities are inherently spatial in that they depend on particular spaces for their construction. For example, spatial visibility (e.g. in terms of the establishment of so-called gay ghettos or various forms of street protest or Mardi Gras) has been important to the development of lesbian and gay rights. In turn, these performances of sexual dissidents' identities (re)produce these spaces as lesbian and gay spaces in which sexual identities can be, and are forged (Mitchell 2000). Likewise, in Chapter 8, section 8.3 explores the way in which rurality is constructed by both people living in the countryside and those outside it. Section 8.4 illustrates how the dominant image of the English countryside as a white landscape characterized by close-knit social relations and heterosexual family life obscures 'other' meanings and experiences of the rural, and how this, in turn, contributes to alienating social groups such as black people, travellers, and lesbians and gay men who feel uncomfortable or 'out of place' in these environments.

As this second example demonstrates, dominant sets of power relations often mask the complexities, multiplicities and ambiguities of the social activities, meanings and behaviours associated with the production of particular spaces. In some cases hegemonic discourses are literally inscribed in the landscape. Chapter 2, section 2.6.1 examines their role in creating socio-spatial environments which dis-able people with bodily impairments by marginalizing them economically, socially and politically. Likewise, Chapter 3 examines some of the ways housing designs are instrumental in shaping our everyday experiences.

Discourses can also be more invisibly imposed across space, influencing what assumptions, expectations and social behaviours are expected or deemed appropriate for particular spaces. By focusing on acts of transgression Tim Cresswell's (1996) work has exposed the way that these normative landscapes are often 'taken for granted', only becoming apparent when they are disrupted. Chapter 6 examines how normative or moral landscapes are produced in public space. Here, Butler's (1990) notion of performativity has also been used by geographers to understand how spaces, like identities, are produced through repetitive acts that take place within a regulatory framework. Chapter 6 shows how the performance of lesbian and gay sexual identities in public space disrupts and therefore exposes the way in which the street is commonly produced as 'naturally' or 'normally' a heterosexual space.

Space has also become a resource for those who are marginalized or excluded. In particular, the spaces of the margin (real material locations, but also symbolic spaces of oppression) have been reclaimed by black writers such as bell hooks as

spaces from which to speak. She (hooks 1991: 149) describes marginality 'as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.' Chapter 3 explores the way in which the home acts as a site of resistance for black people in the face of white hegemony.

In writing about space geographers have often drawn on a number of dualisms which are significant in Western thought such as mind/body, public/private, work/home, human/animal, white/black, etc. (see Chapter 2). These dualisms are invested with power in that they are not two sides of unrelated terms 'A' and 'B'. Rather '[w]ithin this structure, one term A has a positive status and an existence independent of the other; the other term B is purely negatively defined, and has no contours of its own; its limiting boundaries are those which define the positive term' (Grosz 1989: xvi). This dualistic way of thinking has structured the way geographers have come to analyse and understand some spaces. For example, the study of the workplace has often been privileged over the space of the home, and clear boundaries have been assumed to be drawn between dualisms such as public and private space or urban and rural space. However, these dualistic ways of thinking about, and analysing, space are increasingly being challenged and resisted. Chapter 3 questions the boundaries which are often drawn between home and work, while Chapter 3 and Chapter 6 both expose the fact that 'private' and 'public' spaces are not fixed and stable categories but rather that the boundaries between them are blurred and fluid. Similar arguments are also made in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 in relation to the boundaries which have been imagined between the urban and rural and between culture and nature.

Spatial metaphors such as 'inside' and 'outside', 'centre' and 'margins' are frequently employed not only by geographers but also by social scientists in thinking about social relations. Yet such positions do not represent marked or differentiated positions. Rather, Gillian Rose (1993: 140) argues that, paradoxically, we can simultaneously occupy 'spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside spaces'. She cites the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who describes how black women employed as domestic workers in white households occupy such a contradictory position. On the one hand, they are familiar with and close to the children within the white family; on the other hand, she explains, they are also made to feel that they do not belong. They are present but also absent. For writers such as Rose (1993: 155) these paradoxical spaces 'threaten the polarities which structure the dominant geographical imagination'.

In challenging dichotomies, geographers are increasingly 'imagining a somewhere else' (Johnston *et al.* 2000: 771). While Rose (1993) describes this as a 'paradoxical space', other writers have talked in terms of hybrid space (Bhabha 1994) or Thirdspace (Soja 1996). These different conceptualizations of space represent ways of thinking about the world which focus on 'the production of heterogeneous

spaces of “radical openness”’ (Johnston *et al.* 2000: 771). Susan Smith (1999: 21) argues that the concept of Thridspace:

turns our attention away from the givens of social categories and towards the strategic process of identification. It forces us to accept the complexity, ambiguity and multi-dimensionality of identity and captures the way that class, gender and ‘race’ cross-cut and intersect in different ways at different times and places.

Further, she goes on to argue that ‘Thridspace may provide an opportunity to move beyond our historic preoccupation with social divisions – with what holds people apart – and think about what is gained from a discourse of belonging.’

■ Summary

- The way in which geographers have conceptualized space has become increasingly sophisticated.
- In the past, it was conceptualized as an objective physical surface with specific fixed characteristics upon which social categories were mapped out. Likewise, social identities were taken for granted as ‘fixed’ and mutually exclusive.
- Understandings of space and society have been reassessed. Space is now understood to play an active role in the constitution and reproduction of social identities, and social identities and relations are recognized as producing material and symbolic or metaphorical spaces.
- Thus space and society do not merely interact with, or reflect, each other but rather are mutually constituted.
- It is now acknowledged that individuals and groups have multiple identities, occupying positions along many separate lines of difference at the same time; and that identities also develop in between the boundaries of social categories.
- Dualisms have frequently structured geographical analyses of space. In challenging dichotomies geographers are now opening up new ways of thinking about space: Thridspace.

■ 1.3 Boundaries and connections

This book is organized around a loosely nested set of scales from the body to the nation. As Neil Smith has argued, scale is a useful way of organizing or thinking