THE POWER OF PLACE AND SPACE

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Everyone assumes that being in one place rather than another makes a difference, as does being near rather than far. This means that geographic place and space affect everyone. Until recently, much of geography has ignored these effects. Rather, it has examined place, space, and landscape as though they were outcomes of processes. Geographers have asked what made a place or an area what it is and why things are as they are. But they have paid little attention to the effect of landscape or location on people. Yet they are reminded of these effects every day in choosing to be one place rather than another. Geographers have taken up these issues in new proclamations such as "place matters" or the "power of place and space," as well as in new, complex concepts about spatiality, territoriality, and a general sense that space and place as well as nature and culture are mutually constitutive.

To proclaim geography's importance this way is one thing, but to understand what is meant is another. The self-evident powers of space and place are really complex and elusive. In this brief space I can touch on only some of the complexities. What does it mean to say that geographic place and space have such powers? How can they help produce anything? How can they be causes? I do so primarily by focusing on place, which is the more accessible concept, and then include space.

Consider an outdoor social history museum. It is a place that attempts to display how life was lived in some specified period and place in the past. Museum visitors are subject to a series of rules about what they are and are not permitted to touch, where they may walk, what they may eat, when they may enter, and when they must leave. Another set of rules applies to museum employees. And yet other rules apply to what artifacts should and should not be exhibited in this place and where. The museum could not exist without such rules, which receive authority from the force of custom and from local, state, and federal laws and statutes. Rules about what is and is not to be in place—territorial rules or territoriality—pertain not only to the museum but also to every place that can be imagined, from streets and roads, which stipulate types of vehicles and their speeds; to houses, which define residents, guests, and strangers; to factories and offices, which define and arrange workers, managers, and owners; to cities and states, which define citizens.

Territorial rules about what is in or out of place pervade and structure lives and provide specific examples of how place has power. It may appear in these cases that the power of place is secondary to social power, in that the latter seems to impart the power to place. This is not the case, as the

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theory of territoriality reveals, precisely because the various forms of social power cannot exist without these territorial rules. Territorial and social rules are mutually constitutive, which is the concrete meaning of the new, often overused term spatiality.

Yet another set of issues arises when these territorial rules are initiated, in part because of thoughts about what would happen if they did not exist. The museum has specific hours and regulations for the conduct of visitors because of what someone in authority imagined would occur if people were at liberty to enter and leave at will. The same could be said for all other places. There are rules about conduct in classrooms and access to them and rules about behavior in streets and citizenship in nations, because of what is imagined would be the case if there were no such rules.

Imagining behavior in the absence of such rules leads to the second way in which place or space has power, for it emphasizes that people and objects interact in space and that there could be laws of behavior which govern these interactions. It forces the building of models of how distance and the relative locations of people and things affect behavior. This line of thinking leads, in other words, to the familiar geographical enterprise of spatial analysis, with its central-place models, the von Thünen model, and gravity and potential models, all of which emphasize that space has an effect on interaction and that this effect is most clearly expressed as a function of distance. Notice here that the specific place does not have power but rather that it resides in the spatial relations, especially the distances, among things. Thinking of the world this way is similar to how the natural sciences see the effects of space, which is central to all their theories. This approach makes it appear as though humans too, deep down in some sort of natural state that is unrestrained by territorial rules, would be affected by space and distance in the same way that atoms and planets are.

Thinking of and modeling human spatial interactions this way are essential, but this sense of the effect of distance or space does not stand on its own. Rather, just as territorial rules about in or out of place are employed because of what people think would be the natural state of spatial interactions, the natural state does not and cannot exist because the groups of things that are interacting, the cities and the travelers, and the routes through which they interact, the highways and telephone lines, can occur only because rules are already in places about how cities, with their streets and stores, and the highways and telephone poles and wires connecting them are supposed to be treated. Cities exist because their jurisdictions are recognized; stores exist because property rights are maintained; and highways and telephone poles function because rules exist prohibiting people from walking or camping on highways and from using telephone poles for fuel. That is to say, the natural sense of spatial interaction presupposes territorial rules of place, just as these rules presuppose the natural state. Each offers a different but dependent sense in which space or place has an effect.

To this dialectic can be added a third and equally important sense in which space or place has an effect. Let us return to the museum example. On the one hand, it contains territorial rules because of what people think might happen in the natural state of spatial interaction if these and other rules were lifted. On the other hand, there is no real natural state in which all rules could be absent because they are required for the existence of the very things with and through which humans interact.

The awareness of this interdependence of in or out of place and spatial interaction leads to questioning the meaning of any landscape. Is the place natural, genuine, and authentic or constructed, staged, and nonauthentic? Does this museum really re-create a past as it actually was, or is this an attempt by some persons to impose their conception of history? Does the museum reveal or disguise the past? How should the landscape be interpreted?

Questioning the meaning of the landscape raises the general problem of surface and depth or appearance and reality. Is the site real, or is the real something beneath the surface? This questioning of surface and depth, appearance and reality, is the third means by which place and space have an effect. It comes from an awareness of the first two, but it also becomes a force that is as important as they are and that in turn affects them. If some persons contend that the museum is not reconstructing the real past, then they will also argue for a change in this landscape, a new type of exhibit, or even an alternative museum. In each case, this change in place, initiated by the third effect of questioning surface and depth, must again involve the first two effects—spatial interaction and territorial in or out of place. These in turn initiate once more the question of appearance and reality, surface and depth.

Each of the three factors describes how place or space has basic effects that reach to the deepest levels. In or out of place refers to territorial control as constitutive of social relations and power. Spatial interaction refers to the role of space in natural science causality and its application to human behavior. Surface and depth, or appearance and reality, refers to the role of space and place in problematizing meaning. Each of the three is implicated in the others. So not only is geography constitutive of natural causes, social power, and meaning, but also space and place draw together the respective realms of the natural, the social, and the intellectual, which is the concrete meaning of the term mutually constitutive. Integrating these diverse realms is another and combining effect of space and place—one that helps explain the capacious qualities of geography.

There remains the question of distinguishing between these related effects of space and place and the role of humans as agents. What is the connection between people and these geographical factors? The answer is complex, and I can only hint at some of its parts. The argument has been that place and space are constitutive of nature, social relations, and meaning. Just as these elements are part of place, so too can they be found in the self: people are

natural beings, social beings, and intellectual beings. How these are connected by the self depends on how they are connected by the places the person occupies. People are always in a place, and places constrain and enable. If a person is locked in solitary confinement without contact with nature, society, or intellectual stimulus, personal sense of self disintegrates. Sanity and personality need the stimulation of nature, society, and meaning to give them form. Not only can place help mold or destroy the self, it can also liberate it. A person who craves intellectual stimulation may find life at a university positively explosive. But place depends on people, who construct and organize it. In these complex ways, self and place are themselves mutually constitutive.

All of these are means by which place, space, and geography exert power that is basic to every human thought and activity. Exploring these connections reveals how all people are geographical beings. Examining the implications of this idea shows that there is no limit to the scope and power of geography.

FURTHER READING

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