

To what end do we theorize sociospatial relations?

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As a nongeographer, I remember the introduction during the 1980s of spatial categories into social science analysis as unexpectedly enriching our efforts, particularly those of critical materialist analysis, in a powerful way. To discover the constitutive significance of space and spatiality for society meant that social interactions and social relations under capitalism could be better understood as societally produced in historically specific social spaces. It was not space as such, space as an object or container, that was discovered to be so extraordinarily helpful, but the active *production* of space as serving the implementation and consolidation of social interests.⁽¹⁾ By making explicit that sociospatial patterns (transforming in front of our very eyes) are not ‘natural’ aspects of ecological adjustment, but rather the result of specific economic and social interests, of power relations and contestations, the ‘spatial turn’ also helped us to decipher the ways in which capitalism deflects, displaces, and temporarily ‘resolves’ its crises and internal contradictions. It was as if social science needed an infusion dispensed by geographers in order to gain an understanding of how ‘spatial fixes’ are being used to displace or internalize contradictions characteristic of capitalist social formations and thus to secure their reproduction. This was a mutually beneficial encounter: critical geographers learned that spatiality could not appropriately be understood apart from society and social relationships, while social theorists were eagerly incorporating “a central and encompassing spatial dimension” into their paradigms (Soja, 1985, page 92; cf Soja, 1980).

Since then, of course, space has been widely incorporated into theoretical frameworks across the disciplines, and not just with regard to investigating capitalist societies, but phenomena of all kinds—from economic processes to political organizations, from commodity chains to interfirm dependencies, from citizen regimes to imaginaries, from social conflicts to contestation—have been studied in terms of their spatial dimensions; the relevance of the spatial to all kinds of issues and developments now seems obvious, and not just in critical social theory. An array of different spatial categories have proliferated in these far-flung research areas, with scholars distinguishing more or less consciously between such categories, giving priority to one or another in different contexts. Though Lefebvre early on emphasized the hypercomplexity of space that cannot be reduced to any one of its dimensions,⁽²⁾ over these last three decades

⁽¹⁾The first formulation of this conception of space was of course developed by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (first published in French in 1974; English translation, 1991) and mediated into Anglo-American critical theory by David Harvey, Ed Soja, Neil Smith, Elenore Kofman, and Elizabeth Lebas. He presented the production of space as three-dimensional, encompassing the production of processes of material interaction, of communication, and of meaning; and he described every social relation as producing a space, all of these concrete spaces—as networks, as markets, etc—as interfering with and interpenetrating each other [hence not to be viewed in isolation (cf Lefebvre, 1991, page 86)], “these interpenetrations—many with different temporalities—get superimposed on one another in a *present* space (Merrifield, 2006, page 105). In this view, space was never interesting as such, but as an instrument and object of accumulation and reproduction.

⁽²⁾“We are confronted not by one social space but by many—indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space’. No space disappears in the course of growth and development: the *worldwide does not abolish the local*.... Thus social space, and especially urban space, emerged in all its diversity—and with a structure far more reminiscent of a flaky *mille-feuille* pastry than of the homogeneous and isotropic space of classical (Euclidian/Cartesian) mathematics” (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974], page 86).

researchers have, in different situations, highlighted or preferred one over another spatial dimension, occasionally generating quarrels over the relative merit of each as a ‘master concept’.

It is against this background that the intervention by Jessop et al (2008) arguing for a systematic recognition of polymorphy in sociospatial theory constitutes an extremely timely and productive contribution to the debate. While others have warned of recent tendencies to privilege geographical scale relative to other aspects of social spatiality (cf Howitt, 1998; Leitner and Miller, 2007, page 116),⁽³⁾ Jessop et al move beyond a problematization of the theoretical myopia implied by one-dimensional modes of sociospatial analysis to propose a conceptual framework through which “a polymorphous, strategic-relational analysis of sociospatial processes might be pursued” (page 399). By sketching the succession of sociospatial dimensions as they have been embraced, over the last thirty years, as focal points for sociospatial theory, and by highlighting their relations with each other, Jessop et al put the various spatial ‘turns’ in their place, reveal the unstated assumptions underpinning each, and thus help clarify contemporary debates about the possibilities and limits of each of these distinct spatial concepts.

Rather than explore the historical embeddedness of these (more or less) successive waves of social-scientific inquiry (guided, as they were, by the respective lexicons of territoriality, place, scale, or networks) in the specific conjunctures and transformations which scholars as well as activists have sought to explain and act on, Jessop et al propose to elaborate a framework for the development of a multidimensional, polymorphic mode of sociospatial analysis, with the goal not only of producing thick descriptions for given research objects, but also of generating more precise and substantive analyses of “some of the ‘big questions’ within geographical political economy” (page 397): the TPSN (territory, place, scale, and networks) schema, they suggest, can be used to flesh out and reconceptualize issues such as the urban question, the regional question, uneven spatial development, state spatial restructuring, spatiotemporal fixes, and multiscalar governance.

While the proposal is argued with impressive cogency and while the concepts and analytical procedures suggested by the TPSN schema may indeed prove very helpful for developing spatially sensitive explanations of all kinds of concrete–complex phenomena, they also raise some issues that may deserve further reflection and discussion, if this framework is to succeed in stimulating insightful investigations of the possibilities and limitations of contemporary restructuring processes.⁽⁴⁾ I briefly raise three closely related issues that might deserve further debate: (1) the status and intent of spatial theorizing, (2) the epistemological interest driving and the context-dependent assumptions undergirding the theorizing, (3) and the political implications of the theorizing.

1. The greater the variety of phenomena a theory seeks to explain, the bigger the price paid in terms of its robustness. This tension inherent in all theory-building efforts is also manifest in the high standards formulated by the TPSN framework, which seeks to provide conceptual tools for a space-sensitive analysis of an encyclopedic array of processes, practices, institutions, developments, and trajectories. As space, or rather: different forms of spatialities, matter(s) to all of them, it is helpful to be equipped with

⁽³⁾ Brenner himself has also argued for the coequal relevance of a variety of spatial dimensions: in particular, place, territory, and networks next to scale, in theorizing (uneven) spatial development (cf 2001; 2007; 2008).

⁽⁴⁾ Unlike the current lively debates which “often run their course without major impact on empirical inquiries into matters spatial”, the authors do hope to bring their multidimensional framework to bear on concrete research (page 389).

a sixteen-cell checklist⁽⁵⁾ to make sure that none of the possible spatial impacts and inferences is neglected in the investigation. As all of these spatialities are both the result of manifold material and discursive processes (and as such of a certain durability which conditions the possibilities for action) *and* are constantly negotiated and reworked (hence malleable within the constraints of specific historical conjunctures and power relations), the resulting methodological strategies might appear to be endless. In any case they may be rather intimidating to scholars who may not be sure that their specific research problem requires a polymorphic mode of sociospatial analysis or who may not yet be fully versed in the strategic-relational approach. It would seem that the effort to capture as many dimensions of spatiality as possible of whatever social activities or organizations are under investigation does not help with assessing *the particular relevance* of whichever spatiality to those social forms or practices. In spite of the expressed emphasis on the *social production* of space and the assurances that the strategic-relational approach highlights the contradictions and conflicts inherent within capitalism as well as its attempts to displace and temporarily resolve them, there is the danger that the authors' effort to synthesize multiple spatial dimensions into one totalizing polymorphic framework might abet a reification of the spatial form. Put bluntly: it is never the spatial form that acts, but rather social actors who, embedded in particular (multidimensional) spatial forms and making use of particular (multidimensional) spatial forms, act. The relevance of a particular spatial form—either for explaining certain social processes or for acting on them—can be measured only from the perspective of the engaged actors. Thus, in order to define criteria for the relevance of (a specific form of) spatiality, we need to start, both in our theoretical endeavors as well as in political practice, from concrete social processes and practices rather than reifying spatial dimensions.

Similarly, the mere accounting of the various spatialized strategies employed in contentious politics, while helping to avoid reductionist views of the sites and objectives of resistance movements, does not in and of itself tell us much about the significance of the respective spatial dimension in this context. Are movements more successful if they employ a bigger repertoire of spatial strategies? Do they get more or less politicized if they jump scales upwards (cf Mayer, 2007)? Do place-based movements overcome their localism only when they embrace additional spatial strategies? Such substantive and political questions are what matters for analyzing social movements, and they might be answerable only by correlating them with the spatial strategies that state and corporate actors use to internalize and obfuscate conflicts of interest between social forces.

2. It was in the context of a major transformation in the sociospatial patterning of modern global capitalism (having to do with the emergence of a new international division of labor and the crisis of the Fordist regime of accumulation) that the spatial turn in the social sciences became so productive. And the focusing on one or another spatial dimension of restructuring over the last thirty years also reflects social-scientific efforts to account for specific changing sociospatial relations; scholars were seeking to make sense of questions raised by ongoing, empirically observable transformations and associated conflicts in their particular time and space. Each renewed theoretical effort can be contextualized within a major restructuring process of sociospatial relations. Thus, the principle of territoriality, which had become the basis for organizing political-economic activities since the Peace of Westphalia and consolidated during

⁽⁵⁾Which, however, depicts only a two-dimensional matrix of how different spatial dimensions impact on each other. Hence the authors suggest that three-dimensional and four-dimensional concepts and methods could or should also be developed, at the risk of making the scheme completely unwieldy as a tool to guide investigation.

waves of capitalist industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries (conceiving states as occupying mutually exclusive, sovereign territorial spaces) helped with understanding the changing role of the state in an emerging world market; the territorial organization of the world market into nation-states was a way to resolve competition in pre-global times.⁽⁶⁾ The principle of place helped deal with the increasingly differentiated landscape of places (core/periphery, urban/rural, and other forms of interplace differentiation) brought about by expanding capitalism's new spatial divisions of labor. The principle of scaling has helped to capture those more recent forms of sociospatial reorganization, in which inherited global, national, regional, and local relations have become recalibrated through post-Cold-War capitalist restructuring and state retrenchment, propelling particularly supra-national and subnational arenas to the fore of sociospatial regulation. This 'scalar turn' was particularly important in the evolution of sociospatial concepts as it allowed the emergence of a theoretical critique of the "ontological fixation" (Schmid, 2003, page 233) on the nation-state, that is, the taken-for-granted primacy the national scale held in the economic and political organization of Atlantic Fordism, and has brought into focus the mutable, contested, but very real hierarchical structures of neoliberalism in which actors act. It highlighted the rescaling of state activities since the crisis of Fordism as well as city-regions as the newly privileged scale of socioeconomic activity and institutional transformation (cf Brenner, 2004). The principle of networking, finally, has helped to account for the proliferation of networks of social, economic, and informational organization, which now span space (without covering it) and frequently cross hierarchical scales.⁽⁷⁾ The ability of this approach to conceptualize connectivity provided methodologies for capturing yet another important sociospatial dimension particularly relevant for research on systems of information transfer, new logistics of production and distribution, and also governance systems and interurban relations.

These successively elaborated perspectives each relate to societal contradictions that bring forth specific spatial forms (places, scales, and networks), that manifest themselves in them, and are thereby organized in a spatiomaterial way.

While none of these perspectives necessarily claimed that previously relevant (and analytically useful) dimensions no longer exist,⁽⁸⁾ each has attempted to problematize the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning the prior generation of social-scientific inquiry, and they have done so not only from the vantage point of new stages in capitalist development, but often also from within divergent theories of power and society. Thus, most network theorists operate with a poststructuralist concept of society, viewing social power as diffused throughout topological networks and

⁽⁶⁾ See, for example, Poulantzas, writing in 1978: "If territory... and historical tradition retain the essence which they had when the nation's role was less important, and if the tendency of capitalism really is towards internationalization of markets and capital, then it would be easy to conclude... that the role of the nation is diminishing in the current phase of transition.... [T]he current internationalization of the market and of capital does nothing to reduce the peculiar weight of the nation.... Territory and historico-cultural tradition... acquire a meaning under capitalism that is completely different from the one assumed in the past. It is this difference which defines the problem of the market as that of the unity of the 'internal' market. Furthermore, it produces the uneven development of capitalism as an unevenness of historical moments affecting those differentiated, classified and distinct spaces that are called nations or national social formations" (page 97); see also Braunmühl, 1976).

⁽⁷⁾ This proliferation of networks has led some scholars to argue, along with Castells, that "For the first time in history, the basic unit of economic organization... is the network" (Castells 1996, page 198).

⁽⁸⁾ As far as I can see, only some advocates of the network paradigm have claimed that scale should be expurgated (cf Marston et al, 2005).

downplaying centralized, hierarchical, and class power. Such sociotheoretical assumptions mesh neither with the more regulationist paradigms implicit in most scale theories nor with the materialist perspectives of the international division of labor or state theory approaches that influenced the earlier territorial and place theories. Before embarking on a project of synthesizing such different sociospatial perspectives into one (TPSN) framework, their divergent and contradictory socio-theoretical assumptions, their methodological and political differences would need to be sorted out and made congruent. Otherwise the TPSN approach would suffer from internal contradictions, assuming social formations impossibly structured by class cleavages, condensed power relations, and flat networks all simultaneously.

3. Finally, we need not only a clearer understanding of the empirical basis on which this latest call for renewed theoretical effort is built, but also a clearer understanding of the political meaning of the sociospatial categories proposed, that is, of the political debate over which categories should matter. The authors concede that the four proposed categories are not the only important spatial dimensions of social relations, that environment/nature or positionality might be additional candidates (footnote 5, page 392). The reasons given for why we ought to now focus on combinations of territory, place, scale, and networks are the neologisms popping up all over contemporary debates implying the mutual imbrication of two or more sociospatial dimensions. Pointing to such social-scientific lexicons, however, invites suggestions for further frequently used categories, without specifying criteria for assessing which might be more or less relevant. Indeed, how could we defend *not* including environmental/ecological categories at a historical moment where the expansion of capitalism threatens to destroy its material conditions and is thereby spawning conflicts and contestation of unprecedented scope and scale?

The primary concern of Jessop et al’s proposal, however, is not with identifying strategically relevant contradictions of the current social formation, nor with specific social interests upholding unequal social relations. While the authors emphasize the “importance of contradictions, conflicts, dilemmas, marginalization, exclusion, and volatility, at once within and among each of these sociospatial forms” (page 394), they do not indicate in what ways conflicts and contradictions might be relevant. Instead, they describe the goal of their proposal as: “to encourage a more systematic investigation of how sociospatial relations, understood as strategically selective TPSN ensembles, interact in specific historical–geographical contexts, to produce distinctive orderings and reorderings of the sociospatial landscape, including new geographies of accumulation, state power, and hegemony” (page 395). These interactions “may be understood as expressions of diverse attempts at strategic coordination and structural coupling within spatiotemporal contexts” (page 396). This emphasis on (re)ordering and structural coupling aims at the spatial resolution of contradictory social forces from a *systemic* perspective, as if independent from social practices. But spatial conflicts—no matter of which particular dimension or combination of dimensions—are always social conflicts, driven by interests and struggles for control and empowerment. Their appearance as spatial conflicts often obfuscates underlying class or social interests (as, for example, when capital uses the uneven development between global North and South to play out minimum wage campaigns of First World unions against migrants’ rights struggles for unrestricted movement).⁽⁹⁾ The proposed, rather structuralist framework of sociospatial organization, as it mutes actors and interests, does not lend itself to aiding our understanding of the conditions under which more or less socially just or democratic forms of spatial solutions

⁽⁹⁾ Cf Platform for global social rights at: <http://www.globale-soziale-rechte.de/>

might emerge. That, however, was supposed to be the ‘added value’ of making spatiality an integral part of the material constitution and structuration of social life, as I remember it. Merrifield described the intent of the spatialization of critical theory so aptly: “To know how and what space internalizes is to learn how to produce something better, is to learn how to produce another city, another space, a space for and of socialism” (2006, page 108). This dimension may need to be reinjected into the latest—otherwise brilliant—effort at theorizing sociospatial relations.

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