Space, Place and Power – Week 2: Political-Economic Readings of Space

In “From Space to Place and Back Again”, Harvey draws on his previous work in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) to provide an explanation as to why place-bound identities have become increasingly more important in a world where spatial barriers have significantly decreased; in doing so, he provides us with a reflection on the notion and definition of place. ‘Place’ is a social construct, and we must determine the social processes that construct it; Harvey uses Lefebvre’s matrix in order to think about how places are constructed, represented and experienced as material artefacts, and how they are in turn used as symbolic places in contemporary artefacts. As Harvey’s approach draws strongly from Marxist geography, he focuses on the impact of capitalism on our understanding of places, and in particular on the way in which people become alienated from their roots – from space – in the new world market. Drawing on Marx, he argues that alienation cannot be undone, but transformed: the establishment of differences in the contemporary world has to be effectuated through social practices engaging with the mediating power of money.

Harvey’s article speaks relatively well to Mathews’ *Ghetto at the Centre of the World*, an ethnography of the building complex of Chungking Mansions, in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong. Harvey’s exploration of the production of a spatially differentiated otherness, where communities are able to forge an identity for themselves through exclusionary politics in order to gain power in a given society echoes the description of Chungking Mansions’ inhabitants defining themselves as ‘Hong-Kongers’ despite (a) being spatially separated from the rest of the city, despite the location of the building in the very centre of Hong Kong, (b) purposely refusing to engage in commercial or social activities with Hong-Kong Chinese, who constitute the dominant demographic in Hong Kong, and (c) being economically excluded from the rest of the city and socially discriminated against by Hong-Kongers who characterise Chungking Mansions inhabitants as ‘not belonging’ in the city. As a ‘ghetto’, Chungking Mansions shows remarkably similar attributes to Harvey’s description of Times Square, as both a representation of low-end globalisation, small scale exchanges, and the importance of capital in any individual’s daily lives; and as a centre of togetherness, hosting several communities which have made this “place” their “home” (although these communities do not necessarily interact between them). Interestingly, the politics of exclusions at play within this space are such that they push some individuals living in Chungking Mansions to deny or contest their appurtenance to the building. A Hong Kong Chinese friend of mine, whose family was one of the few Hong Kong Chinese families living in Chungking Mansions, repeatedly told me that, although he had lived there his whole life, he did not ‘belong’ to Chungking Mansions, and refused to consider the place as its home, as his family had been rejected by most communities in the building.

Chungking Mansions also provide us with a clear example that the establishment of differences in the contemporary world can and has to be through social practices engaging with the mediating power of money: indeed, money and the sale of goods or services form the backbone of this ‘city within a city’. The restaurant owners, shopkeepers, inhabitants, prostitutes and asylum seekers of Chungking Mansions all form their own separated communities through the exchange of money, goods and services with other groups. In Harvey’s words, the ‘sociality of money’ here allows all kinds of othernesses to take on an independent existence and survive. This analysis of Chungking Mansions is best achieved by using the Lefebvrian matrix recommended by Harvey – that is to say, by observing how it is experienced, perceived, and imagined – in order to understand the importance of this place for Hong Kong and the globalised world.

Smith’s discussion of the Tompkins Square Park and Lower East Side riots focuses on the production and reproduction of geographical scale as a political strategy of resistance – here again drawing on Lefebvre’s understandings of space and how its must be ‘produced’.

Although Smith follows a Marxist/Lefebvrian framework similar to Harvey’s, the focus here is no longer on ‘place’, but rather on ‘scale’ as a criterion of difference between different kinds of space, where scale “both contains social activity and at the same time provides an already partitioned geography within which social activity takes place”. Through this understanding, society (and economy) produce space and thus social relations through space.

I find Smith’s article, and in particular his description of homeless people’s struggles in the New York of the late 1980s-1990s, particularly enlightening if applied to discussions of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, where both resistance and struggle are enacted on every scale as Nicole Constable describes in her 1997 book. At the scale of the **body**, FDHs are often forced by their employers to cut their hair, to wear a uniform, and to remove their jewellery and make-up – their image is controlled so that they can be directly identified as an ‘other’ on different scales. Within the **home**, their behaviour is controlled through rules and curfews, but also through spatial configurations: they are only given access to certain spaces, forbidden to enter others (such as the family’s toilets, bathrooms, or chairs); in **urban spaces**, they are alienated from spaces of consumption and administration – their presence in shops or restaurants is often the source of verbal or physical abuse; and so on. Simultaneously, despite the way in which these scales are constructed to exclude FDHs from the ‘regular’ spaces of production, consumption, administration, they all allow forms of resistance to take place. At the level of the body, FDHs may refuse to follow their employers’ directives, for instance by wearing skirts when they are forbidden to do so; but more importantly, every Sunday, FDHs reclaim the urban spaces they are excluded from during the week in the same way that homeless people discussed the idea of “taking back the park” after their eviction from Tomkins Square Parks. Indeed, on Sundays these Filipino and Indonesian women gather in very public spaces, making their otherwise invisible presence impossible to avoid, and engage in activities that are usually denied to them, by going shopping, applying make-up and nail polish in public, eating in restaurants, and holding gatherings of religious groups or labour unions. Observing how these scales are produced, and studying various aspects of each of these scales – such as the construction of identities, the interactions with other scales, and the political possibilities for resistance – allows us to bring back the notion of space in politics.