Response paper - week 2 - by Arthur (Eirich) - ‘Political-Economic readings regarding space’

Last week, I attempted, amongst others, to point out the relationship between an absolute space - such as a building in Oxford - and state political power (for instance, Lefebvre 1974:51). This week’s response goes a bit further in seeing the relationship between a space and place, and their connection with the political, economic and social sphere.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Harvey emphasises the importance of seeing that both space and place are social constructs (1993: 4), but there seems to be a difference, although one could argue that a place is a subdivision from a space. To make it clearer – and in relation to my last week’s response –, a space seems to be a more abstract concept which can, for instance, be seen in absolute, relative and relational terms (Harvey 2006), whereas a place – not losing its abstract characteristic entirely – seems to be precisely a space understood in relational terms, namely as a ‘lived experience’ concerned with the individual’s emotions, experiences and imaginations (Lefebvre 1974: 34; Harvey 2006: 279). The connection between the social, economic and political sphere becomes clear by drawing on the idea that an elitist minority has managed to manipulate and control space in a capitalist system (Lefebvre 1974: 59, 62), as shown by drawing on the example of a building in Oxford last week. Moreover, capitalism establishes networks of places by moving surplus from one place to another (Harvey 1993: 5), which brings the idea of an abstract space to life for people at different places.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Seeing the slight difference between space and place and the connection with the political, social and economic sphere, makes it possible, I would argue – following, for instance, Harvey (1993) and Smith (1993) – to think about alternatives to capitalism and statism and therefore, change. It is remarkable how Harvey’s argument that ‘working-class movements are [...] generally better at organising in and dominating *place* than they are at commanding space’ (1989: 236, cited in Smith 1993: 107) reflects de Certeau’s idea of strategies and tactics (1984: 34-39). Strategy would then be the establishment’s power to construct space and place, while a working-class movement has the opportunity through tactics to redefine a place and then possibly change spaces on a broader scale, too. Redefining place and space might be possible by thinking about scale. As Smith makes it clear there is a dialectic relationship when it comes to scale; it does not only set – as a ‘strategy’, for instance – possible boundaries and strengthen dominant power structures, such as capitalism and patriarchy, but it can, also challenge dominant power structures – by thinking about tactics – and redefine them (1993: 102, 111, 114). It is crucial, therefore,– if one desires change – to expose connections of capitalist exploitation and statist power on a global and local scale in different places in order to develop a language for different scales and radical ways to possibly challenge current power structures, too (see also Smith 1993: 102, 112).

One example of challenging statism and capitalism by re-imagining a particular place and re-defining relationships at different scales can be seen in Rojava.[[3]](#footnote-3) As Graeber points out the idea of a social revolution that is anti-statist and anti-capitalist looks in Rojava as follows: in order to get rid of capitalism, one needs get rid of the state, but you cannot get rid of the state if you do not get rid of patriarchy (2015, 3:52). The different scales become visible by thinking of capitalism in terms of – but not only – the global, by thinking of statism in terms of the national, and by thinking of patriarchy as the local/home (see also Smith 1993: 101, 104-112). Re-imagining and re-defining the different scales by starting with one’s own place and having similar places all around the globe – for instance, by having similar autonomous, bottom-up but not exclusive communes such as in Rojava – can be a revolutionised approach to space, place and power, and a genuine approach to the ‘collapse of spatial barriers’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Limits to this approach can certainly be seen due to Marx’s idea of capitalism – influencing both, Harvey (1993) and Smith (1993) – which is present in statist societies with a ruling class that extracts surplus from the working class (Graeber 2001: 24-25). How do we apply – if at all – the concepts of space and place in societies that are already anti-statist, non-capitalist, such as the ones – as I implied last week – described by Scott (2009) in Zomia?

**Bibliography:**

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1. Hence, it would be a mistake to see space in isolation. There is, I would even argue, a tendency in ‘Western’ and statist societies to separate and isolate spheres (just think about the ‘different’ subjects in the social sciences you can study at university), instead of seeing, for instance, how the political, the economic and the social mutually influence and also constitute each other (see also Harvey 1993: 3) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At this point I am actually wondering what Harvey’s and Smith’s position regarding a world-system(s) approach is since they seem to suggest a global division of labour but continue to use a Eurocentric idea of capitalism (Harvey 1993: 6; Smith 1993: 112) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An introduction regarding Rojava’s social experiment, Anarchist influences, and the re-imagination and redefinition of goals for the Kurdish struggle in Northern Syria can be found here: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syrian-kurds-murray-bookchin_us_5655e7e2e4b079b28189e3df> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By genuine I mean an approach that fundamentally differs from Harvey’s description of a ‘collapse of spatial barriers’ (1993: 3-4) which he seems to connect with a Eurocentric idea of globalisation. It could also be interpreted as a problem that Harvey does not recognise his privilege since barriers, boundaries and borders are a brutal reality for a great part of the world’s population. Smith, on the other hand, explicitly states that ‘it is not just that the rich express their freedom by their ability to overcome space while the poor are more likely to be trapped in space; differential access to space leads to differential power in constructing the spatial scale of daily, weekly and seasonal life’ (1993: 106). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)