Response Paper - week 3 - Arthur (Eirich) - Phenomenological Understandings

This week’s response reiterates a few of my points with respect to the importance to see a relationship between absolute space, relational space (place) and state political and economic power. Moreover, I will also attempt to look at further possibilities of how notions of space and place could be reimagined and reconstructed within a broader project of political, economic and social change.

A good starting point with respect to understanding the importance of phenomenology – broadly used here as the study of experiences and senses – in both reinforcing structures of oppression and violence, and reimagining them to lead to possible change (see de Certeau 1984: 94-95)[[1]](#footnote-1) is by looking once again at my example of a building in Oxford in week 1. As de Certeau puts it to ‘feel good’ (1984: 108), therefore, at a specific place cannot be seen in isolation since one’s experiences, emotions and imaginations (Lefebvre 1974: 34) play a fundamental role in how that place is perceived and lived. I argued that Oxford as such was not intended for, for instance, working class people who are usually not familiar with the spatial configurations of places that reflect ‘public buildings and palaces of political leaders and institutions’ (Lefebvre 1974: 47) and it is quite likely that one – coming from a non-elitist background – might feel alienated and estranged, and not ‘good’. However, I would further argue that – coming from a non-elitist background[[2]](#footnote-2) as the global majority of us does – actually wanting to ‘feel good’ at such a place reproduces precisely the problem and the power structure such a place reflects.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, movements that are concerned with political, economic and social change will most definitely benefit from thinking about the importance of phenomenology, i.e. how do people actually feel at a particular place; instead of readopting, therefore, the establishment’s practice of ‘looking down like a god’ (de Certeau 1984: 92) by drawing maps[[4]](#footnote-4) and attempting to disentangle people from relational space (place) (de Certeau 1984: 92-92; see also Harvey 2006: 273, 276, 282-284; Lefebvre 1974: 34), it is indispensable to include the importance of experience and the sphere of senses to not only point to power structures but to also change them.

This brings us back to my last week’s discussion about strategies and tactics (de Certeau 1984: 34-39), and why tactics are so important for working class people because it is simply impossible to write down all tactics (see also de Certeau 1984: 97, 99) which makes it possible for human beings – especially the ones who are being oppressed – to be creative, to resist, and to re-imagine and to de-/re-construct places (tactics), and as a consequence spaces (strategy) (see also de Certeau 1984: 96, 100). However, and this is also a major problem with respect to de Certeau’s text, it is very important to ask to what extent are those who are oppressed having the means to actually challenge the space and think creatively. When I talk about means, I do not merely talk about the economic sphere (which is however undeniably connected to it) but also about the temporal and physical. To make it clear, if one has to secure her/his subsistence by selling his/her labour[[5]](#footnote-5) and quite likely being exploited, how does one have the time and strength to actually be creative.[[6]](#footnote-6) This criticism is certainly not new but there is a reformist approach, for instance, demanding a basic income for everyone that could potentially lead to revolutionary change since it may give people the opportunity to have time to be creative, to challenge forms of violence and oppression, including the formation of abstract spaces. However, one may see the problem – and this is why it is a reformist movement – to wait for someone (here it is the government) who has power over you to ‘kindly give’ you money, so you could do what you would like to do, be creative and ironically be possibly able to challenge the power of those who are giving you the money. Hence, there are some people who turn to direct action – instead of waiting for someone else – and by doing so, they actually are creative and are re-imagining spaces and places through spatial practice. Apart from the Occupy movement that actually ‘liberated spaces’ (see de Certeau 1984:105), one could also see squatting as precisely the direct action (tactic) that enables to rethink places, challenge a broader framework of distribution of private property and think about societal change, such as Greek Anarchists recently did who are now running ‘a refugee centre out of a squat house’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To put it in a nutshell, change can certainly happen by taking seriously the experiences of those going and living through different spatial formations that are implicitly (at times explicitly, e.g. borders)[[8]](#footnote-8) oppressive and violent. However, it is important that we must not forget that there are limits and not everyone actually has the privilege of having the means – as described above – to have the opportunity to think about and express her/his experiences and possibly be creative in the challenge of spatial formations and forms of oppression; nonetheless, we need to find ways to open up this opportunity, leading to feasible political, economic and societal change.

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1. One could connect this quite sensibly with Smith’s (1993) great argument about scales as both means of oppression and means of re-imagination and change, but due to a lack of space, I will merely mention it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am using non-elitist and working class interchangeably throughout this text [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the past, I referred, for instance, to the RMF movement which challenges, amongst others, ‘merely’ a statue and not even an entire building. Receiving challenge from people who see their power endangered is certainly no surprise; however, receiving criticism from other working class people precisely shows a reproduction of power structures and emphasises the importance to keep other ‘scales’ and forms of oppression in mind, such as race (or gender as argued by referring to Rojava’s goals last week (see also Massey 1996)). (also Hall, Matriculation etc…) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is also up for discussion to what extent the creation of a local Apache atlas as described by Basso (1996: 9) is reproducing structures of oppression; a possible question that follows from this is whether or to what extent are resistance movements benefitting from these mechanisms [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quite interestingly is also the perspective to what extent the person is transformed to a commodity and that wage-labour could be seen as an extension of slavery (e.g. Hoskin 2006, Graeber 2006, Friedman 2000); sth. that is completely missed by Schivelbusch’s description (1986: 40). Moreover, I neglected Schivelbusch throughout my response due to the fact that he mainly focuses how the elitist minority (quoting many Romanticists, e.g. Goethe, Eichendorff) perceived the technological and societal change; one could possibly argue that the spare account towards the working class is also a result of the fact that the working class was usually erased from history or at times did not want to be recorded (see similarities with Scott 2009 here), but it is actually horrible how he generalises and takes situations for given that are totally strange and unfamiliar to most - if not all - working class people at that time (towards the end of Chapter 4 it becomes only clear that the working class has a different experience) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note that this could just be seen as an extension of Marx’s analysis about capitalism functioning, amongst others, due to alienation of people, especially regarding the working class, meaning that people alienate themselves a) from the work, b) from the products they produce, c) themselves, d) and their fellow human beings due to the fact that the proletariat only works to survive and is miserable within the capitalist system (see also Morrison 2006, p. 49; Cox 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.good.is/articles/greek-anarchists-squat-house-refugees> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A perspective also neglected in Schivelbusch with respect to his Eurocentric and privileged notion of an annihilation of space (1986:33) (same criticism last week with respect to Harvey (1993: 3-4)) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)