Response Paper -week 4 – Arthur (Eirich) - Reconciling the phenomenological and political-economic approach

Last week, I emphasised the importance of phenomenological approaches with respect to the production of space and its possible change since these can give agency to people by focusing on the body, experiences and senses (relational space/ lived space); however a fundamental problem was that the economic and material sphere was almost entirely excluded/disregarded (e.g. in de Certeau 1984), or merely mentioned briefly after making generalisation which arguably do not apply to working class people during a particular time at all (e.g. Schivelbusch 1986). These generalisations about bourgeoisie behaviour (e.g. notions of being calm, distant, quiet in public) could still be useful in understanding how ideas of ‘proper behaviour’ are produced by the bourgeoisie, and could be analysed as a means to control because they gain their power through reproduction by the working class/oppressed people (see also Graeber 2007). To be more precise, I am alluding to the connection between a phenomenological approach and the economic sphere which becomes clear by taking, for instance, into consideration Gramsci’s idea of hegemony by which those who own the means of production also control ideas to which the ‘masses’ (have to) consent in order to establish hegemonic control (Gramsci 1971: 12; see also Fanon 1965: 47; Lefebvre 1991 [1947]: 12; Sopranzetti 2013: 60).

This is precisely where Fanon’s argument in ‘Algeria Unveiled’ (1965) becomes interesting and very important. As Fanon attempts to show, colonial control was not only feasible by occupying and producing economic and political spaces, but also – considering scale, as Smith (1993) notes it – by exerting control over the female body (1965: 37). This shows clearly the connection between the economic sphere and a phenomenological approach in producing and controlling space, and as a consequence people. However, it does not mean that there is no way to resist this form of control. As argued last week, by taking one’s (sensory and bodily) experiences seriously, one can be creative in deconstructing and reimagining places and spaces. Fanon, in fact, shows this creativity beautifully in how women’s resistance and its important contribution to the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria was possible by manipulating one’s own body and experiences by either wearing the veil or taking it of (depending what would disguise the colonial power more) (1965: 58-59, 61-62). Moreover, one can also see a connection to my argument two weeks ago about the resistance in Rojava, in which the phenomenological and economic approach get combined by taking the idea of scales seriously: by wanting to get rid of capitalism, one needs to get rid of the state, but you cannot get rid of the state if you do not challenge patriarchy (see also Graeber 2015, 3:52).

Therefore, by understanding the relationship between the economic sphere and phenomenological accounts, one does not only see how certain power structures come into being which undeniably marginalise people or produce spheres of marginalisation (see also Lefebvre 1991 [1947]: 11-12), but also how people could possibly challenge dominant power structures. It seems to come down to how Sopranzetti describes it in his ethnography about motorcycle drivers: the motorcycle drivers seem to be ‘pawns in this game of mobility, capitalism and urban politics’ (2013: 68).[[1]](#footnote-1) By describing these drivers as pawns, one can undeniably see them as a marginalised group of people who belong to the weakest players in this chess game we call life; however, one should never forget that a game of chess though is not possible if the pawns do not move (or ‘ride’ as described in Sopranzetti’s ethnography (2013: 65, 73)) which shows their possible power in reconfiguring and changing the game (Sopranzetti 2013: 126, 128), especially in developing a ‘common conscious’ (such as a working class conscious, also with other sectors[[2]](#footnote-2)), and possibly overcoming different forms of alienation that are produced within capitalism and have an effect on one’s bodily experience, as well (Lefebvre 1991[1947]: 61-62).

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1. In my view, the phenomenological difference due to economic differences between working class and middle class motorbike drivers needs to be stressed, which does not become clear in Sopranzetti’s notion of freedom and danger (2013: 78) and which seems to be the same for both, working and middle class. However, it could be argued that the freedom and danger the middle class person experiences is exclusively connected to her/his temporary enjoyment (an argument similar to what Zizek (2007) attempts to allude to in his description about class difference in the film ‘Titanic’) and not necessity. If one takes Sopranzetti’s description of waiting and boredom, the difference becomes obvious, since for the working class motorbike driver’s waiting can be connected to significant social roles, such as giving directions or watching someone’s house (2013:79-81) which does possibly open up new opportunities, too (2013: 81-90). It is very questionable whether waiting would play a role for the middle class motorbike driver at all because s/he arguably does not have to wait due to economic privileges. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)