Week 2: reading note

Space, Place, and Power

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In “From space to place and back again,” David Harvey reads Heidegger’s phenomenological approach to space/place through a Marxist lens in an attempt to explain the increasing dominance of place in a world with diminishing spatial barriers. Heidegger understands place as the locale in which the fourfold comes together, which is achieved through dwelling which in turn is only possible through building. As such, dwelling and building are essential to human nature and this establishes rootedness, having an authentic relationship with one’s natural surroundings. In the modern and capitalist world, autochthony has been lost due to technological developments and mass production and, as a result, the longing for place, an original engagement with the material world, explains the paradox of the decrease in spatial barriers yet the increase in the interest in the notion of place.

Yet, from a Marxist perspective, Heidegger’s understanding of place emphasises its experiential nature and thereby obscures the political economy of space and place. More precisely, it fails to acknowledge the relational dimension – a place cannot be understood without reference to the spatial relations in which that particular place is engaged. This means that the longing for place in the Heideggerian sense, firstly, cannot be seen independently from alienation in the capitalist system, but paradoxically, capitalism has also enabled us to imagine alternative communities in new places. That is why, the process of the space and place construction should be understood as the interconnection of materiality, representation, and imagination.

The interconnectedness of material and metaphorical conceptions of space can be shown through the notion of scale. Neil Smith’s critique of the spatial turn focuses on the lack of attention to spatial difference and differentiation in social theory. As a result of a historicist bias, temporal differentiation has been prevalent, for example in debates about periodisation of history. Strangely, spatial differentiation has been largely non-existent, while spatial scales, such as urban, national and global, are social products and are the subject of political struggles. Therefore, a critical analysis and use of the notion of scale will show that spatial differentiation does not only change the material space at which we look but also impacts the representation and imagination of that space.

The ways in which scale changes representations and imaginations can be nicely illustrated with Gordon Mathew’s ethnography of Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong. This building is the site of what he calls “low-end globalisation,” the informal transnational flow of goods and people. In the global scale, Hong Kong is an important centre of commerce and trade as result of its close location to mainland China and the well-developed financial and economic infrastructure. As such, it attracts entrepreneurs from around the world, particularly from developing countries in Africa and South Asia. Hong Kong, in the imagination of these business people, provides upwards socioeconomic mobility.

In the national/urban scale – Hong Kong, due to its size, is a nation and a city at the same time – the building is represented and imagined completely differently. Chungking Mansions is known as a “dodgy” place where extra-legal activities take place. Ironically, the owner’s association, which is monoethnically Chinese, look down on the African and South Asian co-occupants of the building, while they consider themselves Hong Kongese through belonging to the building. Thus, while the Hong Kongese generally avoid the building (and even if they tried to enter they would be perceived as gangster or police officer,) the owners of the Chungking Mansions, who are Chinese immigrants, proclaim their Hong Kongness by singing national songs at their meetings.

In conclusion, the spatial differentiation highlights the dual nature of space. On the one hand, it has the capacity to include and enlarge by, for example, providing a space in which entrepreneurs from across the world can trade and thereby benefit from the diminishing of spatial barriers. At the same time, space is exclusionary and limiting in nature; the Chungking Mansions is rejected as unsafe by the local population of Hong Kong and the occupants, especially Africans, experience racism. Thus, spatial practices and associated representations and imaginations are depended on the scaled perspective one takes.