Week 4: reading note

Space, Place, and Power

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This week’s readings attempt to reconcile the political economic and phenomenological approach to the study of space. The notion of phatic labour is central to these attempts to account for both relative space (as produced) and lived space (as experienced). The commonalities of these readings include rendering the invisible visible and emphasising the indispensability of the unnoticed. Moreover, they point out the fact that lived spaces are structured but that the outcomes of the spaces are not predetermined.

Elyachar’s article on women’s sociality in Cairo explores the notion of phatic labour, which she uses to describe the everyday life efforts of Cairene women to establish and maintain communicative channels that provide an infrastructure for social and economic life. These efforts, however, are not recognised as labour in Western social theory, as they are not easily identifiable and thus not measurable. Yet, these channels are not only vital to the economic system, which is dominated by men, but also contributes to the production of identity. These channels provide links through which emotion and information can be shared and exchanged. Phatic labour of a madam, for example, Elyachar notes, includes the investment of her profits in young men, which provides them with the material possibilities that in turn allow them to fulfil their social role as men. Thus, the phatic labour of Cairene women creates a vital infrastructure in a community where women do not hold a formal economic position.

Similarly, Fanon describes how Algerian women perform phatic labour – establish communicative channels – during the Algerian resistance against the French colonial occupation. The French, in their discourse of civilisation, declared the female body as battleground through which the entire Algerian resistance could be suppressed. Her veil, according to the French colonists, signified her oppression and thus the woman needed to be freed from the oppressive Algerian man. Unveiling her would bring shame and defeat upon Algerian society. An unveiled woman, thus, in the eyes of the French, became a supporter of their rule. Algerian women in the resistance used this discourse to their own advantage, as they were able to unsuspectedly carry weapons and messages through check-points by not wearing the veil. The French rulers found out and became suspicious of unveiled women and in turn female members of the resistance started to wear the veil again in order to hide weapons. As such, the women adjusted their *techniques du corps*, to use Mauss’ term, to perform a phatic function.

Motorcyclists in Bangkok also conduct phatic labour by delivering newspapers and, most notably, serving as the most used mode of transport in the city. Sopranzetti notes that, as result of historical city planning, motorcyclists are indispensable to the city’s infrastructure. Their contradictory position of marginality and of absolute necessity refers back to the similar position of Cairene women that Elyachar describes. Like her, Sopranzetti argues that Marxist theory, which focuses on production, fails to recognise the importance of mobility that is indispensable to capitalism. As such, in the context of Thailand, sites of mobility rather than sites of production become loci of contestation and political conflict. However, unlike Elyacher, Sopranzetti does not provide a thorough analysis of the political economy or phenomenology of gender. From a phenomenological perspective, he briefly notes that motorcyclists as masculine riders, from the perspective of car drivers, commit transgressive acts by zig-zag through traffic at high speeds. However, the notion of masculinity is not further explored. As such, it also does not become clear how historical political economic developments contribute to the notion of masculinity, which is associated with high speed, risk-taking, and providing for the family.