

The background of the cover is an abstract painting with a rich, textured surface. It features a palette of deep blues, purples, greens, and earthy browns, with visible brushstrokes and layered colors that create a sense of depth and movement. The composition is non-representational, focusing on color and form.

A Comparative Ethnography *of* Alternative Spaces

Edited by

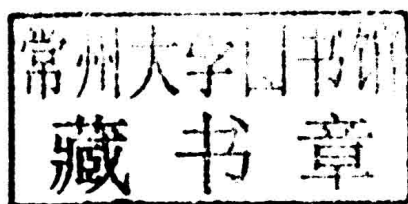
Jens Dahl and *Esther Fihl*



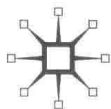
A COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF ALTERNATIVE SPACES

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Jens Dahl and Esther Fihl



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a result of a collective and interdisciplinary research project formulated by the authors of the chapters. In the initial discussions when comparing our ethnographies from different parts of the modern world, we came to envision certain structures, networks, situations, and livelihoods as bearing features of in between or twilight realities located between established states, local institutions, or moralities. Since we saw some of them as resembling cracks in formal power structures or as volatiles with no permanent or codified structures, we decided, as a research group, to try to explore our different ethnographies as alternative spaces.

Our ambition has been to challenge existing understandings of cultural encounters by confronting these with empirical knowledge from the current global world order. Through a series of long-term and short-term fieldwork studies in Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Central Asia, China, India, Caucasus, Mexico, Russia, Singapore, Syria, Tanzania, The United Nation in New York and Geneva, as well as through Internet studies, we have obtained material on innovative forms of global social organization and communication among cultural and religious groups. This lead to studying the new kinds of agendas and the effects and affects involved in the different settings.

Many ideas and theoretical perspectives have along the way been shared within the research group. However, we are sincerely grateful to all the colleagues and the audience who participated in our conference and PhD seminar "Alternative Spaces and Cultural Translations," which we arranged with The Regional PhD school in spring 2009, and for all the constructive comments we received on very early drafts of the chapters of this book.

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JENS DAHL AND ESTHER FIEHL
Copenhagen, June 30, 2012

ABOUT THE COVER ILLUSTRATION

In her life, the Danish artist Emilie Demant Hatt (1873–1958) looked for alternatives to her farmer family background and in her paintings she often captured the alternative in the form of twilight and the floating “in-betweeness”. In 1907–1908 she lived for one year among Sami reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia, taking ethnographical notes, photos, and making sketches and paintings of nomadic life. She did most of the transcriptions and the organization of the manuscript for Johan Turi’s “Book of Lapland” (1931), which as the first text written in Sami by a Sami author has become a classic. Later, she married Gudmund Hatt, professor of cultural geography at the University of Copenhagen, and with him, she traveled to various parts of the world, including the Tropics, and the cover illustration is from that part of her life. Oil painting, privately owned.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO ALTERNATIVE SPACES

Jens Dahl, Esther Fihl, and Birgitte Schepelehn Johansen

This book is about people who, in various ways, seek to carve out a space for themselves relatively independently of the existing social and political realities of which they, nevertheless, continue to be a part. Through a range of ethnographical cases, the book addresses the innovative and complex ways in which social groups show abilities to position themselves between cultures, between states, between moralities, or between local communities and state authorities, thus creating new opportunities for agency in the modern world.

Over the last decades, groups of people in all parts of the world have, sometimes in quite creative ways, found new niches or arenas in which to promote their rights, interests, identities, or ambitions, on the fringes of national and/or local traditional institutions. These opportunities are fueled by the specific form of modern globalization and are thus often made possible by the invention of new electronic and interactive means of communication, the intensification of an integrated global economy, the establishment of new norms for international cooperation, the breakdown of the Communist bloc, and the subsequent creation or restructuring of nation-state projects.

The focus in the following chapters will be on different groups of people who have tried to use these opportunities for political or social reconfiguration to establish their own alternative spaces. The social spaces that emerge often seem to be located in cracks or pockets between cultures, or between the local and the national, and in that sense they can be analytically designated as “alternative spaces” in relation to the traditional world order of local institutions, religious denominations, nation-states and international organizations of states.

There have always been people who have tried to establish themselves in opposition to dominant power structures; people have protested, they have rebelled, left or emigrated. Others have been ignored, isolated, exiled, or ostracized by the community or society. This surely accounts for many minorities, indigenous peoples and other often deprived groups. However, instead of focusing on binary alternatives of marginalized social groups in opposition to established power structures, we wish to turn our attention toward people who have managed to take advantage of zones of ambiguity without cutting the links to the security provided by local communities, national or international institutions.

The following chapters are the product of an ongoing discussion in a collective research project exploring such in-between spaces throughout the world. Each of the 11 researchers is, in different ways, engaged in an inquiry into the ethnographical and sociological variance of such spaces, in order to discuss the analytical implications of viewing these as alternative spaces. Applying the concept of alternative spaces to each case adds to the understanding of its *modus operandi* and gives a deeper understanding of the strategies people use to contextualize or decontextualize their actions. From early on in our discussions, we started to designate these spaces as “alternative” because they neither seem to fit a spatial conception of margin or periphery, as opposed to a center, nor do they seem to fit a clear-cut dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. Rather, they are themselves nurtured by, and thriving upon, the structures of power and tradition. At the same time, the comparisons between the empirical cases quickly revealed differences in the ways these alternative spaces are unfolding, the means by which they are constituted, and the strategic possibilities they offer their inhabitants.

Alternative Spaces Defined

The alternative space is an analytical term that we use to designate the social space that emerges when a category of people act together in temporal meeting places or during events, sometimes located at geographical sites, and sometimes only existing as virtual realities. The alternative space as an abstraction seeks to designate the relatively independent, inclusive and nonbounded zone of convergence in which the “members” reconfigure their identities and construct a new common agenda for social action. In this way, alternative spaces are “in-between” spaces rather than oppositional structures, and as such both “inside” and “outside” its constituent elements. The in-between position potentially gives the “members” of the alternative spaces the possibility of controlling their own agenda

without engaging in open conflict with the existing dominant structures. We find alternative spaces precisely in the heart of well-established communities and yet still in opposition to them. It is this "in-betweenness" that puts the alternative space at variance with spaces "set aside" (such as a prison or a mental home), spaces excluded from society (such as Maroon societies), spaces at the margins of society (such as squatter towns) or a "third space," a lived space existing parallel to the material and localized first space and the imagined second space (Soja 1996; Cresswell 2002).

Alternative spaces may thus emerge from and thrive upon already existing power structures although several of the empirical cases that we have studied also imply a moment of rupture, creating new perspectives on the structures from which they emerge. Alternative spaces can, in this sense, be seen as meeting places or arenas where indigenous peoples, marginalized peoples, expatriates, or others have found a crack in the textures of the nation-state, the international community or in between local communities that, for the time being, are unable to act as the sole organizing unit. This is possible because of periods of restructuring, or because the nation-state is an ever unfinished project (Das 2004, 249; Asad 2004, 279). These platforms, niches, or arenas thus sometimes develop and function in a kind of vacuum, where social bonds and affiliations are undecided and ambiguous and, because the alternative position offers a new view of the already existing ones, it may offer new solutions to old conflicts or problems. As alternative spaces are found to be nurtured by the very power structures that they potentially react against, however, alternative spaces are not sites of revolution or rebellion as such; they are, rather, sites of volatile resistance linked to other forms of power that lies in the ability to maneuver just outside dominant institutions or systems (Scott 1990). As a consequence, the forms of resistance that are made possible are not so much in direct or open opposition to the dominant expressions of power but in some sense converging with them.

The alternative space bears a resemblance to Hetherington's description of a place of otherness, an alternate ordering (Hetherington 1997) or a noninstitutional space within the state where "... people not only raise their voices to be heard but are seen to live different, alternative lives, openly hoping that others will share in their vision or at least accept their difference" (Hetherington 1997, 7). In this way, alternative spaces may be nurtured by existing power structures allowing those without offices to meet, raise their voices, organize and challenge those under whose auspices they convene. Or, to adopt terms used by Das and Poole, these spaces are included in the political community but denied membership in political terms (Das and Poole 2004). The global disjuncture between

culture, economy, and politics (Appadurai 1995) creates cracks in the systems that make room for new opportunities as well as for new uncertainties. Under such circumstances, opportunities may arise for social transformation in which people can turn victimization into alterity, as alternative spaces potentially constitute a position from which to re-describe and reconceive traditional relations of authority and power, and from where the binaries of, for example, colonial relationships, majority and minority relations, or state power versus exile can be identified and equally challenged (Bhabha 1990).

Alternative spaces are characterized by being zones of ambiguity since they thrive on the indetermination or indecisiveness of social relations, where alternative modes of ordering may develop. Or they can develop in situations of ambivalence, in the cracks that may occur when two seemingly contradictory or opposing positions or arrangements nevertheless coexist, creating a space between, for example, the legitimate and the legal. Herein lies the transformative potential so characteristic of alternative spaces. An alternative space can be likened with a “shadow land,” where “it is possible to discern ‘openings’ that contain significant potential for reform, including the possibility of exerting an impact on the character of emerging political realities,” to adopt a phrase used by Franke Wilmer (1993, 39).

Alternative spaces are often fragile since they emerge when the dominant power structure loosens its grip on social life, or as a sort of by-product of the activities of these structures. This interconnectedness with the domains of the established power provides the alternative spaces with a certain volatility, and this makes it extremely difficult for those in power to take them over or even control them. They therefore obviously hold potential for also different forms of localized resistance and may eventually evolve out of events of mass global activism like the recent “Occupy Everywhere” movements of protest meetings around the world (Juris 2012). This volatile constitution is, on the other hand, an inbuilt weakness because it makes it more difficult to organize the alternative spaces internally and it makes the platforms from which resistance can emerge more fragile.

As seen from several of the cases that follow, the identified alternative spaces may often appear as important arenas for developing and negotiating identities, positions, and symbols, although we have not identified them as places of belonging. Rather, we have treated them analytically as temporary zones of convergence. People return from the alternative space to their communities, to their homelands, or to their nonvirtual realities, but with changed notions of attachment (Escobar 2001). It should be

emphasized that this “migration” between alternative spaces and other spaces may take place both in a geographical sense as well as in a virtual one. To leave an alternative space can thus be a physical movement as well as a move in the construction of identity, values, and so on, and the alternative space may be inactive or “uninhabited” for shorter or longer periods of time.

The temporality that accompanies the alternative spaces makes the issue of order and decision-making within the spaces pertinent. Since we have most often found no codified rules or membership status in the kind of social spaces we are dealing with here, there are also no legal ways to exclude people, except by freezing them out, banning them, or *de facto* marginalizing them. And this is largely the result of consensus-creating processes, where a common ground is sought through more or less explicit negotiations of inclusion and exclusion. This flexibility in the exercise of decisive power within the alternative spaces is both their strength and their weakness, because the space can be altered, taken over and used for purposes other than those imagined by the people who took the initiative to create it, or who were active when a space was developed. But, as a sociality, it is under continuous development, change and reconstruction when joined by people from outside.

It is our ambition with this volume to draw the contours of an analytical term that has the potential to tease out new traits and features of the ways in which people organize themselves socially in the modern world. Moreover, we have done so by grounding our discussions, which have led to the coining of the idea of alternative spaces, in empirical cases. In the following chapters, we use the term as a prism to explore a number of empirical activities, each of which will have its own characteristics and analytical potential. The cases presented are thus of great variance and when the term “alternative space” is used to denote a specific empirical reality, it embodies one or more of the mentioned aspects of “alternative spaces” as an analytical abstraction. So, when using the plural form “spaces” we are deliberately focusing on the comparative ethnography of diversity and complexity that is to be found empirically.

“In Between”: Vacuums, Ruptures and Social Reconstructions

The creation of alternative spaces is facilitated not only by certain events but also by the ruptures in or reconfigurations of current orders that occur, for example, when new political systems emerge, or when traditional ones undergo significant changes. When periods of “...social

transformation seem to provide simultaneously the best and the worst evidence for culture's influence on social action," lives are unsettled (Swidler 1986, 278) and new strategies and organizational structures are formed. Under such conditions, old symbols and rituals may gain a new significance and new ones may be formed. This is illustrated in Helen Krag's study (chapter 8). When the Soviet Union collapsed, and before new political units had established themselves, there were minorities in the Caucasian region who saw this as an opportunity to realize their hopes for creating nations or autonomies of their own. Few, if any, of these attempts succeeded, while others such as Abkhazia came out of the conflict between Georgia and Russia battered, and yet others, such as Chechnya, were crushed, resulting in vast numbers of exiled refugees. Instead of establishing diasporas abroad, the Chechens tried to create exiled alternatives across borders, sometimes in unity with other exiled minorities from the North Caucasus.

In Krag's case on Chechnya, the identity as "exiled"—in contrast to an identity as a "diaspora"—is important because it pertains to a sense of temporality. In this regard, the Chechen exile resembles the case of the Danes living abroad studied by Margit Warburg (chapter 7). However, unlike Krag's Chechen case, the Danish expatriates in Singapore constitute themselves in a quite different way, because it is not about the construction of an alternative space on the grounds of persecution, war, or other disasters, but takes the form of a local retreat with a conflict-free extension of the national Danish space.

An example of the emergence of alternative spaces in times of political reconfiguration is also given by Lars Funch Hansen (chapter 4). He discusses how the current ethnic revival among a Caucasian group, the Circassians, in its Turkish diaspora has been politicized and nurtured by a reconfiguration of the role of state powers in Russia and in the Caucasian republics. In this Circassian example, however, the emergence of the new diasporic space also contains ambiguity in the form of internal disagreements and polarization. Through his investigation of the Circassian diaspora organizations in Turkey, Hansen demonstrates the existence of a new space for action, and how it has resulted in an increased politicization of Circassian issues, in which a number of more recently established organizations are emphasizing their opposition to the older and more established ones. This politicization represents a polarization, where a greater diversity can be observed in the Circassian diaspora as a result of the ongoing democratization process in Turkey. Democratic transition and postcolonial resistance in this situation take place simultaneously, which makes the emerging space no less ambiguous.

The vacuums that often emerge as a consequence of social restructuring do not in themselves determine what kind of change or movement they spur, and they may open up the possibility of authoritarian leaders hijacking the movement by using the language of nationalism and ethnicity to establish new dictatorial and suppressive regimes. The Caucasian region and former Yugoslavia provide plenty of examples of this. “As with all times of crisis, there are both new dangers and new opportunities unleashed by the multiplicity of confusing and often brutal events that have been shaking the world since 1989...” (Soja 1996, 23).

Cracks or pockets between established authorities (e.g., state authorities or legal frameworks) also offer possibilities for alternative ways of exercising totalitarian power, whereby intimidation and fear of the state permeate the attempts to move beyond, away or across, as amply demonstrated by Lars Højer in his chapter (chapter 10) on the “Uyghur issue,” that is, the situation in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of western China and the ways it is being handled by the Chinese state. Højer shows how the totalitarian processes replicate themselves far beyond the confines of the Chinese nation-state and into the Uyghur diasporas in Kyrgyzstan and European cities. In such cases there seems to be virtually no room for transformations in the Uyghurs’ lives: the totalitarian logic diminishes the space of alterity by creating a constant anticipation of spying, which makes conceptual, social, or territorial boundary-crossing almost impossible. Instead of an alternative space emerging in the cracks between the structures of authority, the space becomes occupied by an authoritarian regime.

Ambivalence and Ambiguity

Matters of key importance for the emergence of new alternative spaces arise when the established state powers are not able to act in accordance with the needs, wishes, and aspirations of their citizens. The loyalty and agency may then shift to new spaces or reinforce old ones, as demonstrated by Esther Fihl in her study on the legitimacy of fishers’ caste councils in South India (chapter 2). In the wake of the tsunami in 2004, which devastated fishing villages and claimed several thousand victims on the southeastern coast of India, the villagers were suddenly exposed to a globalized world of NGOs and to Indian state officials. As neither the NGOs nor the state officials had roots or legitimacy in the local communities, this created a vacuum in which the caste councils of fishers established their own agenda for the redistribution of relief, having the effect of marginalizing the state and frustrating the NGOs. In India, the caste