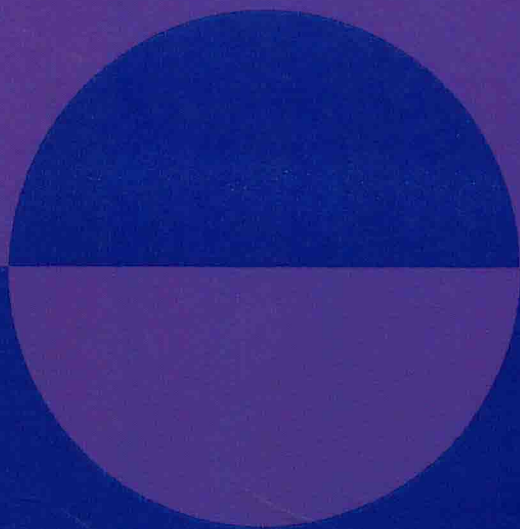


space, place AND gender



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Doreen Massey

Space, Place and Gender

Doreen Massey

Polity Press

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First published in 1994 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
Reprinted 1996, 2004, 2007

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN: 978-0-7456-1235-5
ISBN: 978-0-7456-1236-2 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Garamond ITC
by Acorn Bookwork, Salisbury, Wilts
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

Space, Place and Gender

Acknowledgements

'Industrial restructuring versus the cities', written with Richard Meegan, first appeared in *Urban Studies* (1978), vol. 15, pp. 273–88, and is published by kind permission of Carfax Publishing Company. 'In what sense a regional problem?' first appeared in *Regional Studies* (1979), vol. 13, pp. 233–43, and is published by kind permission of the Regional Studies Association. The paper was originally presented to a Regional Studies Association conference entitled 'The death of regional policy'. 'The shape of things to come' first appeared in *Marxism Today*, April 1983, pp. 18–27. 'Uneven development: social change and spatial divisions of labour' first appeared in *Uneven Re-Development: Cities and Regions in Transition* edited by Doreen Massey and John Allen and published by Hodder & Stoughton in association with the Open University (1988), pp. 250–76; it is published here by kind permission of Hodder & Stoughton and the Open University. 'The political place of locality studies' first appeared in *Environment and Planning A* (1991), vol. 23, pp. 267–81, and is published by kind permission of Pion Press Limited. 'A global sense of place' first appeared in *Marxism Today*, June 1991, pp. 24–9. 'A place called home?' first appeared in *New Formations* (1992) no. 17, pp. 3–15, and is published by kind permission of Lawrence & Wishart. 'Space, place and gender' forms part of a public lecture delivered at the London School of Economics Gender Institute, which was first published in the *LSE Magazine*, spring 1992, pp. 32–4. 'A woman's place?', written with Linda McDowell, first appeared in *Geography Matters: a reader* edited by Doreen Massey and John Allen and published by Cambridge University Press in association with the Open University (1984), pp. 128–47; it is published

viii Acknowledgements

here by kind permission of Cambridge University Press and the Open University. 'Flexible sexism' first appeared in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (1991) vol. 9, pp. 31–57, and is published by kind permission of Pion Press. 'Politics and space/time' first appeared in *New Left Review* (1992) no. 196, November–December, pp. 65–84, and is published by kind permission of *New Left Review*. I should particularly like to thank Richard Meegan and Linda McDowell for agreeing to my including articles which were written jointly with them.

The articles collected here cover a considerable period. Over those years I have worked with and learned from a large number of people, both inside and beyond academe. I should especially like to thank Richard Meegan with whom much of the earlier work was done, when we were both working at the Centre for Environmental Studies, and my colleagues in geography at the Open University. A number of the articles were written in the context of courses for the OU, either directly as part of a course, or emerging from the constantly provocative discussions in 'course-team meetings'.

The period over which the articles were written (the late seventies to the present) was as a whole a fairly turbulent one. What is pleasing is that, from the early skirmishings with neo-classical location theory, through the debates over locality studies, to the more recent exchanges over post-modernism and feminism, disagreements in print have not overwhelmed personal friendships.

Finally, I should like to thank Rebecca Harkin of Polity for encouraging me to undertake this project, and Doreen Warwick of the Open University for her help with its physical production.

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General Introduction

The terms space and place have long histories and bear with them a multiplicity of meanings and connotations which reverberate with other debates and many aspects of life. 'Space' may call to mind the realm of the dead or the chaos of simultaneity and multiplicity. It may be used in reference to the synchronic systems of structuralists or employed to picture the n-dimensional space of identity.¹ Likewise with place, though perhaps with more consistency, it can raise an image of one's place in the world, of the reputedly (but as we shall see, disputed) deep meanings of 'a place called home' or, with much greater intimations of mobility and agility, can be used in the context of discussions of positionality.

The papers in this collection pull out a few threads from the enormous complexity of this field and put the case for a particular way of thinking of space and place. It is not the only way in which they can be thought about; both concepts are incredibly mobile and I have no wish to take issue with that in principle. Nor are the views advanced here simply incompatible with all others. There are other lines of debate about space and place which derive their impetus from different questions and which concentrate on different issues. The conceptualizations presented here do not pretend to be exhaustive. What the papers collected here do is focus on particular aspects of the ways in which space and place are commonly conceptualized, in daily and political life as well as in academe. The arguments emerge from particular debates and respond to issues which I see as having lent to space and place especially problematical readings in recent years. This does mean, therefore, that there are some ways of thinking of space and place which I do want to argue against. The aim is to put forward alternative readings which are appropriate to these times.

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The central thread linking the papers is the attempt to formulate concepts of space and place in terms of social relations. Throughout, there is an assumption that one aspect of those relations which is likely to be important is that of class. It was from work on the class relations within industrial geography that the arguments emerged. There is another focus developed here, however, and that is the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations. Some of this connection works through the actual construction of, on the one hand, real-world geographies and, on the other, the cultural specificity of definitions of gender. Geography matters to the construction of gender, and the fact of geographical variation in gender relations, for instance, is a significant element in the production and reproduction of both imaginative geographies and uneven development. The papers here, and the introductions to Parts I, II and III, draw out some of these interconnections.

But there are also other levels at which space, place and gender are interrelated: that is, in their very construction as culturally specific ideas – in terms both of the conceptual nature of that construction and of its substantive content – and in the overlapping and interplaying of the sets of characteristics and connotations with which each is associated. Particular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations. My aim is to unearth just some of these connections (other writers have highlighted others, and there are presumably still more). The implication is that challenging certain of the ways in which space and place are currently conceptualized implies also, indeed necessitates, challenging the currently dominant form of gender definitions and gender relations.

The most abstract and perhaps the most complex version of the proposed view of 'the spatial' is presented in the final paper in this collection: 'Politics and space/time'.

Central to that paper is the argument that space must be conceptualized integrally with time; indeed that the aim should be to think always in terms of space–time. That argument emerged out of an earlier insistence on thinking of space, not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'. The fact is, however, that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic. Thus even to understand space as a simultaneity is, in these terms, not to evacuate it of all inherent dynamism. The initial impetus to insist on this came from an urge to counter those views of space which

understood it as static, as the dimension precisely where nothing 'happened', and as a dimension devoid of effect or implications. But the argument was buttressed by debates in other disciplines. In biology, Mae-Wan Ho was arguing that 'form is dynamic through and through', a formulation which neatly undermines any idea of the temporal as process and the spatial as form-which-is-therefore-lacking-in-process. It is only in our experience, Ho goes on to argue, that things are held fast, if only for a second. 'There is no holding nature still.'² Physics, since the beginning of the century, had been advocating similar views. Thus Minkowski:

The views of space and time which I wish to lay before you have sprung from the soil of experimental physics, and therein lies their strength. They are radical. Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.³

The view, then, is of space-time as a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity. Moreover, since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.

Such a way of conceptualizing the spatial, moreover, inherently implies the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism. Most evidently this is so because the social relations of space are experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it. But it may also be seen to be so by continuing the analogy with modern physics. For there too the observer is inevitably within the world (the space) being observed. And this in turn means that it partly constitutes the observer and the observer it, and the fact of the observer's constitution of it means that there is necessarily a multiplicity of different spaces, or takes on space. (Thus my arguments about the general nature of space in 'Politics and space/time' and in 'A global sense of place' do not imply that there is only one space/spatiality. They are arguments at the same level as, for instance, Ernesto Laclau's claims that existence is necessarily dislocated. They are of the same status as saying space is fractured, or paradoxical.) Moreover, this point applies specifically to the concept of simultaneity employed above. Thus, as Unwin argues: 'According to the special theory of relativity, simultaneity is relative, dependent on the choice of a frame of reference in motion'.⁴ All 'observers' (participants in social life) move relative to one

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another, each thinking of themselves at rest, and each therefore 'slicing the space-time continuum at different angles'.⁵ Indeed, as the quotation from Ho indicated, simultaneities themselves are our own constructions. It is consciousness which introduces a notion of 'now'.⁶ Moreover, this in turn provides a further source of dislocation within space/space-time, for people are everywhere conceptualizing and acting on different spatialities ('A global sense of place').

The reasons for arguing all this, however, are not just intellectual, or in order to be consistent with physics; nor is there any commitment to this view of space as more eternally correct than any other. It is, however, a view of space that may have important characteristics which lend it an especial appropriateness for debates of the moment. Thus, from the argument so far it seems to me important to establish the inherent dynamism of the spatial, at least in the sense that the spatial is not simply opposed to the temporal as its absence, as a lack. The argument thus releases the spatial from the realm of the dead.⁷ Further, such a view directly relates spatiality to the social and to power. Thinking in terms of stretched-out social relations confronts an important aspect of the spatiality of power itself.

Further yet, within this dynamic simultaneity which is space, phenomena may be placed in relationship to one another in such a way that new social effects are provoked. The spatial organization of society, in other words, is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result. It is fully implicated in both history and politics.

'The spatial' then, it is argued here, can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time. It is a view of space opposed to that which sees it as a flat, immobilized surface,⁸ as stasis, even as no more than threatening chaos – the opposite of stasis – which is to see space as the opposite of History, and as the (consequently) de-politicized. The spatial is both open to, and a necessary element in, politics in the broadest sense of the word.

Moreover, thinking about space in this way can also challenge some influential conceptualizations of place. Since the late 1980s the world has seen the recrudescence of exclusivist claims to places – nationalist, regionalist and localist. All of them have been attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own. Within the academic literature as well as

more widely there has been a continuation of the tendency to identify 'places' as necessarily sites of nostalgia, of the opting-out from Progress and History. There was within the discipline of geography a fiercely negative reaction, on the part of some Marxist geographers in particular, to the move to include within the compass of radical geography a focus on 'locality studies' (see part II).

Briefly, it seemed to me that such political and academic positions all rested on a particular view of place. It is a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity. It is a conceptualization of place which rests in part on the view of space as stasis.

If, however, the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings (see 'A global sense of place' and 'A place called home?').⁹ But the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself.¹⁰ Importantly, it includes relations which stretch beyond – the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that 'beyond'. Places viewed this way are open and porous.¹¹

All attempts to institute horizons, to establish boundaries, to secure the identity of places, can in this sense therefore be seen to be *attempts to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time*. They are attempts to get to grips with the unutterable mobility and contingency of space-time. Moreover, however common, and however understandable, they may be it is important to recognize them as such. For such attempts at the stabilization of meaning are constantly the site of social contest, battles over the power to label space-time, to impose the meaning to be attributed to a space, for however long or short a span of time. And there are two levels at which such contests may be joined: the first, and the most usual, is simply over the label/identity/boundary to be assigned; the second, the one being pressed here, is the insistence on pointing out – and thereby challenging – the nature of that debate itself.

Anthony Giddens has argued that one of the consequences of modernity has been the separation of space from place:

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In premodern societies, space and place largely coincided, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population . . . dominated by 'presence' – by localised activity . . . Modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity . . . locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them.¹²

The argument here is that we must not only recognize these changes in the spatial organization of social relations but must also, in consequence, *rethink the unity of space and place in different terms*, thereby conceptually confronting in a constructive way this changed state of the world. Indeed, Edward Said, in his second Reith Lecture, delivered while I was writing this introduction, argued that rejecting such notions of place-identity must be a central task for intellectuals today:

With regard to the consensus on group or national identity, it is the intellectual's task to show how the group is not a natural or god-given entity but is a constructed, manufactured, even, in some cases, invented object, with a history of struggle and conquest behind it, that it is sometimes important to represent.¹³

However, these lines of debate over the conceptualization of space and place are also tied up with gender, with the radical polarization into two genders which is typically hegemonic in western societies today, and with the bundles of characteristics typically assigned to each.

Thus the discussion of space in 'Politics and space/time' relates the strategy of radically polarizing time and space, and of defining space by the absence of temporality, to the broader western mode of dualistic thinking which has been widely criticized by feminists and linked into the same system of thought which so sharply distinguishes between masculine and feminine, defining them through continuous series of mutual oppositions. Thus this pervasive and influential view of the relationship between space and time sees them as dichotomous and as dichotomous in a particular way. It is a formulation in which time is the privileged signifier in a distinction of the type A/not-A. It is, moreover, time which is typically coded masculine and space, being absence or lack, as feminine. Moreover, the same gendering operates through the series of dualisms which are linked to time and space. It is time which is aligned with history, progress, civilization, politics and transcendence and coded masculine. And it is the opposites of these things which have, in the traditions of western thought, been coded feminine. The exercise of rescuing space from its position, in this formulation, of stasis, passivity and depoliticization, therefore, con-

nects directly with a wider philosophical debate in which gendering and the construction of gender relations are central. However, the issue in which I am interested here is not so much the coding of space as feminine (although it raises an interesting question about the masculinism of geography),¹⁴ but the radicalism of the dualistic distinction between space and time and the relationship of that not only generally to other dualistic formulations but also – and crucially – to the violent either/or distinction between polarized genders which is currently hegemonic in so much of western society. The argument is that it is the very form of such dichotomies which must be challenged.

The construction of gender relations is also strongly implicated in the debate over the conceptualization of place. The view of place advocated here, where localities can in a sense be present in one another, both inside and outside at the same time, is a view which stresses the construction of specificity through interrelations rather than through the imposition of boundaries and the counterposition of one identity *against* an other. But why is it that settlement or place *is* so frequently characterized as bounded, as enclosure, and as directly counterposed to spaces as flows?¹⁵

One way of reflecting on this draws on object-relations theory and a number of other, psychoanalytic, approaches to identity-formation ('A place called home?'). In brief, the argument is that the need for the security of boundaries, the requirement for such a defensive and counterpositional definition of identity, is culturally masculine. Moreover, many feminists have argued *against* such ways of thinking, such definitions of identity. The argument is that we need to have the courage to abandon such defensive – yet designed for dominance – means of definition. Many feminists have argued for 'thinking in terms of relations'. It is the strategy adopted here, in very general terms, for rethinking the concepts of space and place.

There are in this way many parallels between the current debate about personal identity and the construction of political subjects and the argument here about the identity of place ('The political place of locality studies'). Just as personal identities are argued to be multiple, shifting, possibly unbounded, so also, it is argued here, are the identities of place. Thus Chantal Mouffe has written that

many communitarians seem to believe that we belong to only one community, defined empirically and even geographically, and that this community could be unified by a single idea of the common good. But we are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities (as many, really, as the social relations in which we participate and the subject-positions they define), constructed by a variety of discourses

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and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those positions.

Teresa de Lauretis, indeed, has argued that the construction of subjectivity in this way is a specifically feminist project.¹⁶ The concept of place advanced here is very similar to that. It is a concept which depends crucially on the notion of articulation. It is a move, in terms of political subjects and of place, which is anti-essentialist, which can recognize difference, and which yet can simultaneously emphasize the bases for potential solidarities. Moreover, if places are conceptualized in this way, and if their definition is amplified to take account of the construction of the subjects within them, which are part and parcel of what it is to talk about place, then the identity of place is a double articulation.¹⁷

There are, however, also distinctions which can be drawn between the arguments around the identity of political subjects on the one hand (whether individuals or collectivities) and the identity of places on the other. Arguments for strategic or operational essentialism, put forward by Spivak for instance, whatever their validity in relation to political actors, seem to have less purchase in debates over place (nationalism, localism, and so on). As Fanon and Said have argued, even in the case of national liberation movements (perhaps the classic case of place-based struggles against oppression) it is still necessary to ask what one is fighting *for*. Or again, on a lighter note, Schiller in answer to his own question, 'what is national identity?' replies, 'There is no totally satisfying definition. It is much easier to recognise its absence. A Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in Paris, for example, surely does not qualify as part of a French national identity. A McDonald's outlet in Kyoto hardly expresses the Japanese ethos'.¹⁸ While this is in some sense true (at least in the sense that 'one knows what he means') it is also important to remember that the national identity of which Kentucky Fried Chicken is not part was itself formed over centuries by layer upon layer of interconnections with the world beyond what was to become France. Some of the elements which are now as obviously French as the Kentucky Fried Chicken is not must once have seemed just as 'alien', similarly imported from the global beyond.¹⁹ Moreover, it is also important to note that such ideas of place-identity are also always constructed by reference to the past. Preservationists of place – those fighting perhaps to keep out the Kentucky Fried Chicken – are in this sense seeking to fix, to stabilize, the identity of a particular place, but around an identity which itself is most unlikely to be the product of an autochthonous history. This does not mean that there is no justification for any notion of conservation, but it does mean that the debate should focus on the terms and nature of both conservation and innovation. And

that leads in turn into wider realms of social debate and politics (it may be racism, it may be a class issue – the case of the yuppie ‘invasion’ of Docklands is examined in the introduction to part II) rather than issues of the supposed authenticity of a particular locality. What is at issue is the understanding of – the politics of definition of – a particular envelope of space–time.

The question of the conceptualization of place also links in again to the issue of dualisms. For, as with space, so with place certain formulations of the concept are embedded in concatenations of linked and interplaying dichotomies which in turn are related, both in their general form and in their specific connotational content, to gender. In the pair space/place it is place which represents Being, and to it are attached a range of epithets and connotations: local, specific, concrete, descriptive. Each of these carries a different burden of meaning and each relates to different oppositions. The contrary to these classically designated characteristics of place are terms such as: general, universal, theoretical/abstract/conceptual. It was this kind of opposition, these sets of dualisms, which were in play when a number of Marxist geographers criticized so strongly the renewed interest in localities in the 1980s (‘The political place of locality studies’).

It is interesting in that context to ponder the gender connotations of these pairings. The universal, the theoretical, the conceptual are, in current western ways of thinking, coded masculine. They are the terms of a disembodied, free-floating, generalizing science. (Though they do not have to be; this is not in any way an argument against theory. It is merely to point to the gendered systems of meaning in which its current definition and characteristics are caught up.)²⁰ On the other side of the pairings, the term ‘local’ itself displays, on the one hand, a remarkable malleability of meaning and, on the other, a real consistency of gender association.

First there is the argument of an association between the feminine and the local because – it is said – women lead more local lives than do men; it is an argument which clearly relates to that about the public/private division. Like that argument, however, it should be treated with caution. Most evidently, the whole purpose of the argument here about place has been to problematize the distinction between the local and the global; if each is part of the construction of the other then it becomes more difficult to maintain such simple contrasts.²¹ None the less, in terms of the usual meaning of the word ‘local’, the association with the feminine probably does have some symbolic force. It is, however, even at this level an association which is not generalizable beyond certain cultures at certain times. Writings on the diaspora and on slavery, for instance, indicate the lack of its purchase on the lives of women in cultures other than the white/western ones of the last two centuries. And even within those specific