

Reviewing Space and Place: The Geography of Euclidean Space to the Space of Experience and Imagination

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ABSTRACT

There is an inevitable conflict in geography as in every other discipline of social science, between knowledge and existence. While traditional geography with a positivist bias had stressed on the mechanistic and measurable relationship between man-environment, the antipositivists viewed that human mind is everywhere and human experience moulded the landscape. With these ideas, the geographical treatment of place and space, had also been dynamic and multiple interpretations have projected into the theory of geography. Nevertheless without the presence of a single definition of space or place, the value of geographical research for practical utilization, will be affected. The study is a narrative review to understand and appraise the current body of knowledge on space and place and seeks to address the problem of the ambiguous definition of space and place. The study concludes that both the concepts are mathematical as well as behavioural constructs and place, particularly can be viewed both as physical as well as symbolic, when a particular group attaches a meaning to it, developing a sense of place and identity. Sense of place carves out the space within with social, economic or psychological activities.

Key Words : Existence, Humanistic, Place, Identity, Space

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of place and space have remained dynamic throughout the recent history of geography. Since 1960, there has been a 'spatial turn' in geography where place has been viewed more than just a mathematical construct and subjective meaning came to be attached to it. Perhaps no other term is used so frequently used in geography as space or place. There is a constant reference to the spatial aspect in geography and different interpretations of space are projected into theory and methodology, in geography. However, these multiple interpretations of space or place may reduce the value of geographical research for practical utilization. Not all scholars adhere to any single definition. Some scholars view place as a more general concept from which space is derived. Others view both "space" and "place" as social constructs. This study is hence an endeavour to do narrative review of the contested terms- space and place. The study seeks to address the problem that the discipline of geography has still not been able to form an explicit and unambiguous definition of geographical space and place. The article is a review to identify, understand

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and appraise the published and unpublished reviews on the concept of space and place, systematically.

Objective :

This review paper is written with the general objective to synthesize the diverse perspectives on the understandings of space and place and reveal inconsistencies, if any, in the extant body of research. It is aimed to provide an integrated overview of the reviewed domain.

Specifically, the purpose of the paper is to succinctly review the progress of the understanding of space and place in geography, particularly human geography. Overall, the paper summarizes the current state of knowledge of the topic.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was to identify, understand and appraise the published and unpublished reviews on the selected themes, systematically. This paper is a narrative review to synthesize the findings of literature on space and place, as used in geography. The study is divided into several subsections- the need or importance to understand the concept of space and place within the context of geography, individually review the multitude definitions of space and place and how it has changed over time and scope.

Understanding the Importance of Place, Space and Spatiality in Geography :

According to Hubbard *et al.* (2004), the discourse on space and place is dominated by geographers though both these concepts have aroused interest and space has essentially remained the central concept in social theories, particularly, with the spatial turn in disciplines such as sociology or cultural studies.

Geography has essentially focused on landscape, though landscape is one of the commonly used and (mis) interpreted word in geography, particularly human geography. Though Schuler (1981) has defined geography as landscape science, he divided landscape into natural (a collection of landforms) and cultural (landscape modified by people). While different theoretical and methodological approaches have been adopted to explore the relationship between human and landscape, Humanistic geographers have drawn on the concept of space and place while studying human-environment or human-landscape relationship (Cosgrove, 1998).

The concept of place is intrinsically related to landscape and Olwig (2002) pointed out that land denotes both place and people living in it while *scape* or *schaffen* means to form. Thus landscape should be understood as a place, shaped by its inhabitant.

Though place has been used in various contexts and form make its mark into academic disciplines but place has both location and meaning. Each place has different meaning to different people and hence is individualistic in nature. And with the concept of place, comes space and these concepts are dealt in details, below.

According to Meskell *et al.* (2004) while space is a physical setting in which everything occurs, place is the outcome of the social process of valuing space; a product of the imaginary, of desire, and the primary means by which we articulate with space and transform it into a humanized landscape.

Hubbard *et al.* (2004) in the book *Key Thinkers of Space and Place* outlined some of the important contributors to the discourse of Space and Place in the second half of 20th century, chronologically, who were not necessarily Human geographers. The book discusses how space

and place were identified synonymous to region, area and landscape. This literature focused more on spatial thinking in Human geography in the second half of twentieth century. While physical geographers remained uninterested to map space, prior to 1970s space was considered as a blank canvas on which human activities were to be filled in. In 1950s and 60s, the idea of space was further refined and they restyled geography as a positivist spatial science. This was an era of spatial statistics and modeling and the leading practitioners were Haggett, Berry etc. Following the Quantitative revolution, those geographers who were uninterested in empiricism of space, became more interested in understanding spatial relationships. Space received interdisciplinary attention and it was studied in the light of physics or neoclassical economics and placed emphasis on the importance of three related concepts- distance, direction and connection. Earth's surface was discerned in terms of these three concepts and spatial physics received attention where human activities and phenomena could be reduced to movement, networks and nodes. However, reacting to intense objective analysis, some scholars developed a behavioural perspective that investigated the role of human mind in shaping human spatial behaviour. Following this geographical materialism also emerged in 1970s where space was inherently caught up in social relationships and scholars like Castells, Harvey and Smith argued that cities concretised class inequalities. Lefebvre (1991) argued that absolute space does not exist and it becomes colonized by social activity and proposed trialectics of space, entwining cultural practices and imaginations. Place, thus emerged to be a distinctive type of space, for geographers defined by the lived experiences of the people.

Both the concept of space and place has been dealt in the section below in greater details.

Definitional approach to Place and Space :

Place is one of the most fundamental as well as complicated term, in geography. In geography, Place can be explained in terms of a small scale regional space. Cosmography, chorography or geography, all have viewed place, differently but it is always a central concept to these branches of knowledge (Withers, 2009). Agnew *et al.* (1987) pointed out that there are three fundamental aspects of place; place as location in terms of absolute location and grid references, place as locale *i.e.* material setting for local environments like domestic environment, professional environment etc. and the sense of place or the affective attachment people have to place.

This distinction of place gained momentum, post 1970s with the emergence of critical geography where place came to be viewed as an abstract generality. For Humanistic geographers like Yi-Fu-Tuan, Anne Buttimer, Edward Relph, place was not a functional unit of space but an idea or a way of 'being in the world' (Tuan, 1974). Tuan (1974) defined 'place in relation to space, as arena of movement while place is about stopping, resting and being involved'. Thus place is different from territory or space by virtue of echoing the emotional attachment inherent to it.

Post 1980s, Place Identity came in Cultural Geography and Cresswell (1996) pointed out that people, things or social practices are linked to particular places and place came to be seen not only as a locale but as a social process.

Subsequently, disciplines emerged that concentrated only on one dimension of place like gender studies which stress on masculine space while historical materialism, which sees places as socially produced.

Intrinsically related to the concept of place, is the understanding of space in geography. Yi – Fu-Tuan (1974) described space in abstract terms and defined it as a location which has no social connections for human beings.

As discussed above, the humanistic geographers had given a two dimensional approach to

place- space, the subjective and objective ones. However, Lefebvre (1991), challenged the binary notion by introducing the third term to space and later Soja (1996), followed it too. They argued that human organization transforms Euclidean space into social space, a social product. Lefebvre conceptualizes this through the following; spatial practices (the perceptions and production of space), representations of space (codifications such as maps or plans) and representational space (symbolic use, articulated through cultural products).

The 1991 English translation of Henri Lefebvre's pioneering 1974 book, *La production de l'espace*, brought a new interest in the study of space. Lefebvre challenged traditional notions of space as an abstract and passive. He proposed a theory that unified physical, social, and mental conceptions of space. Lefebvre's work influenced a generation of postmodern thinkers, including Edward Soja and Kim Knott.

Lefebvre's influenced "the spatial turn," a period in the early 1990's when continental theorists and postmodern geographers produced a body of work to understand space in new ways. Influenced by Lefebvre the Marxist geographer, David Harvey, had written influentially about the production of space under capitalism and, in particular, uneven geographical development. Since the spatial turn, space is no longer viewed as static action, but as an arena of struggle that shapes ideas, beliefs, principles, and values. Modern spatial theorists understand space as dynamic and an embodiment and of lived experiences, touching every arena of social and cultural life.

Another interesting methodological dimension to space was given by Knox (2007) who described three ways of measuring space- absolute, relative or cognitive. Absolute space is a mathematical space expressed through points, lines or area and includes topological space as well. The relative expression of space includes socioeconomic or cultural space like sites, situations, routes, expression etc. while cognitive space includes values, feelings or perceptions and includes landmarks, paths.

Geographers, thus turned on to sociology, economics, anthropology to rethink the structure on which spatial relationship are produced. The historic-materialistic perspective of space in geography has been reflected in the writings of Michael Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. Foucault explores the significance of space in "Questions on Geography" and he had highlighted the dominance of time and history. Foucault's influence in Marxist geography can be felt and Lefebvre's work develops on the prevailing materialistic notion of space as the only cultural expression of base and superstructure formations. According to Lefebvre, space displays a physical quality. However it is also social and ideological. Lefebvre went back to the work of Marx and Engels and explained how it was possible to use economic categories as capital investment, profit, rent. Lefebvre's activities are not about individuals but about space as well. Space is produced and reproduced and in a class divided society it represents site of struggle. Harvey on the other hand was influenced by Marxian writings in geography. Radical geographers also pointed out that production of space is tied up to the questions of power and politics. This point has been made in the *Social Justice and the City* by David Harvey where well off residents can afford to live in areas with open space, clean air while the poor are forced to live in areas where housing stock is old.

However, both Harvey and Lefebvre focused on class ignoring factors as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationalism etc. This point has been raised by many of feminist and cultural geographers and Soja's Third space is built on the possibility of expanding geographical imagination. While his First Space focused 'real' material world, Second space offers the possibility of reality through representation, Third space offers the possibility of 'multiple and imagined' space. Third space offers a source of communication for those who are marginalized, racism, patriarchy etc.

Thus the above discussion briefly describes the fundamental concepts of geography and how

the two concepts has evolved over time.

Conclusion :

As the above discussion reveals, space and place has been operationalised in different ways and this has contributed to both being diffused and ill defined concepts in geography. But, both these concepts are fundamental to geographical imagination providing a basis of the discipline which focuses on the analysis of social, political and economic phenomena in geographical context. Geography has adopted a bipolar view of space and place as the discipline emerged from its positivist fold into the humanistic, largely denounced as ‘unscientific’. Both space and place define the nature of geography. If defined by location, place is one small unit linked to other units and in circulation net and it is subsumed under analysis of space. But place has a human face and incarnates experience of its inhabitants. Place should not be explained from the broader frame of space. Though the proponents of antipositivist view operated on the premise that human mind is everywhere but human experience and environment mould the landscape and this idea came into being after years of traditional treatment of man-environment relationship as objective, mechanistic or measurable. Sense of place, carves out the space within which man operates its economic, social and psychological abilities.

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