A Global Sense Of Place

The world is increasingly dominated by movement - of people, images and information. Doreen Massey examines the nature of mobility in the era of globalisation and what this means for our sense of place

This is an era - it is often said - when things are speeding up, and spreading out. Capital is going through a new phase of internationalisation, especially in its financial parts. More people travel more frequently and for longer distances. Your clothes have probably been made in a range of countries from Latin America to South East Asia. Dinner consists of food shipped in from all over the world. And if you have a screen in your office, instead of opening a letter which - care of Her Majesty's Post Office - has taken some days to arrive, you may have read the news from the Middle East, from a kebab house, the branch of the Middle-Eastern bank - must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonised peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonisation, maybe British (from new forms of transport to liver salts and custard powder), later US, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.

One of the results of this is an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by 'places' and how we relate to them. How, in the face of all this movement and intermixing, can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity? An (idealised) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities is set against the current fragmentation and disruption. The counterposition is anyway dubious, of course; 'place' and 'community' have only rarely been coterminous. But the occasional longing for such coherence is nonetheless a sign of the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this. The usual interpretation is that it results overwhelmingly from the actions of capital, and from its currently-increasing internationalisation. On this interpretation, then, it is time space and money which make the world go round, and us go round (or not) the world. It is capitalism and its developments which are argued to determine our understanding and our experience of space. But surely this is insufficient. Among the many other things which clearly influence that experience, there are, for instance, race and gender. The degree to which we can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night, or venture out of hotels in foreign cities, is not just influenced by 'capital'. Survey after survey has shown how women's mobility, for instance, is restricted - in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place' - not by 'capital', but by men. Or, to take a more complicated example, Birkett, reviewing books on women adventurers and travellers in the 19th and 20th centuries, suggests that 'it is far, far more demanding for a woman to wander now than ever before'. The reasons she gives for this argument are a complex mix of colonialism, ex-colonialism, racism, changing gender-relations, and relative wealth. A simple resort to explanation in terms of 'money' or 'capital' alone could not begin to get to grips with the issue. The current speed-up may be strongly determined by economic forces, but it is not the economy.

There are some questions to be asked about time-space-compression itself. Who is it that experiences it, and how? Do we all benefit and suffer from it in the same way?

For instance, to what extent does the currently popular characterisation of time-space-compression represent very much a Western, coloniser's, view? The sense of dislocation which some feel at the sight of a once well-known local street now lined with a succession of cultural imports - the pizzeria, the kebab house, the branch of the Middle-Eastern bank - must have been felt for centuries, though from a very different point of view, by colonised peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonisation, maybe British (from new forms of transport to liver salts and custard powder), later US, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.

Moreover, as well as querying the ethnocentricity of the idea of time-space-compression and its current acceleration, we also need to ask about its causes: what is it that determines our degrees of mobility, that influences the sense we have of space and place? Time-space-compression refers to movement and communication across space, to the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this. The usual interpretation is that it results overwhelmingly from the actions of capital, and from its currently-increasing internationalisation. On this interpretation, then, it is time space and money which make the world go round, and us go round (or not) the world. It is capitalism and its developments which are argued to determine our understanding and our experience of space. But surely this is insufficient. Among the many other things which clearly influence that experience, there are, for instance, race and gender. The degree to which we can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night, or venture out of hotels in foreign cities, is not just influenced by 'capital'. Survey after survey has shown how women's mobility, for instance, is restricted - in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place' - not by 'capital', but by men. Or, to take a more complicated example, Birkett, reviewing books on women adventurers and travellers in the 19th and 20th centuries, suggests that 'it is far, far more demanding for a woman to wander now than ever before'. The reasons she gives for this argument are a complex mix of colonialism, ex-colonialism, racism, changing gender-relations, and relative wealth. A simple resort to explanation in terms of 'money' or 'capital' alone could not begin to get to grips with the issue. The current speed-up may be strongly determined by economic forces, but it is not the economy.

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alone which determines our experience of space and place. In other words, and put simply, there is a lot more determining how we experience space than what 'capital' gets up to.

What is more, of course, that last example indicated that 'time-space-compression' has not been happening for everyone in all spheres of activity. Birkett again, this time writing of the Pacific Ocean: 'Jumbos have enabled Korean computer consultants to fly to Silicon Valley as if popping next door, and Singaporean entrepreneurs to reach Seattle in a day. The borders of the world's greatest ocean have been joined as never before. And Boeing has brought these people together. But what about those they fly over, on their islands five miles below? How has the mighty 747 brought them greater communion with those whose shores are washed by the same water? It hasn't, of course. Air travel might enable businessmen to buzz across the ocean, but the concurrent decline in shipping has only increased the isolation of many island communities... Pitcairn, like many other Pacific islands, has never felt so far from its neighbours.'

In other words, and most broadly, time-space-compression needs differentiating socially. This is not just a moral or political point about inequality, although that would be sufficient reason to mention it; it is also a conceptual point.

Imagine for a moment that you are on a satellite, further out and beyond all actual satellites; you can see 'planet earth' from a distance and, rarely for someone with only peaceful intentions, you are equipped with the kind of technology which allows you to see the colours of people's eyes and the numbers on their numberplates. You can see all the movement and tune-in to all the communication that is going on. Furthest out are the satellites, then aeroplanes, the long haul between London and Tokyo and the hop from San Salvador to Guatemala City. Some of this is people moving, some of it is physical trade, some is media broadcasting. There are faxes, e-mail, film-distribution networks, financial flows and transactions. Look in closer and there are ships and trains, steam trains slogging laboriously up hills somewhere in Asia. Look in closer still and there are lorries and cars and buses, and on down further, somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, there's a woman on foot who still spends hours a day collecting water.

Now, I want to make one simple point here, and that is about what one might call the power-geometry of it all; the power geometry of time-space compression. For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and...
the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this any-
way differentiated mobility; some people are more in charge of it than
others; some initiate flows and move-
ment, others don't; some are more on
the receiving-end of it than others;
some are effectively imprisoned by it.
In a sense at the end of all the spectra
are those who are both doing the moving
and the communicating and who are in
some way in a position of control in
relation to it - the jet-setters, the ones
sending and receiving the faxes and the
e-mail, holding the international confer-
ence calls, the ones distributing the
films, controlling the news, organising
the investments and the international
currency transactions. These are the
groups who are really in a sense in
charge of time-space-compression, who
can really use it and turn it to advan-
tage, whose power and influence it very
definitely increases. On its more proasic fringes this group probably in-
cludes a fair number of Western acade-
emics and journalists - those, in other
words, who write most about it.
But there are also groups who are also doing a lot of physical moving, but
not in a charge of the process in the
same way at all. The refugees from El
Salvador or Guatemala and the un-
documented migrant workers from
Michoacan in Mexico, crowding into
Tijuana to make a perhaps fatal dash for
it across the border into the US to grab a
petite for the favour of some investment.
The 747s that fly computer scientists
across the Pacific are part of the reason
for the greater isolation today of the
island of Pitcairn. But also, every time
someone uses a car, and thereby in-
creases their personal mobility, they
reduce both the social rationale and the
financial viability of the public trans-
port system - and thereby also poten-
tially reduce the mobility of those who
rely on that system. Every time you
drive to that out-town shopping centre you contribute to the rising
prices, even hasten the demise, of the
corner shop. And the 'time-space-
compression' which is involved in pro-
ducing and reproducing the daily lives
of the comfortably-off in First World
societies - not just their own travel but
the resources they draw from all over
the world, to feed their lives - may
entail environmental consequences, or
hit constraints, which will limit the lives
of others before their own. We need to
ask, in other words, whether our relat-
ive mobility and power over mobility
and communication entrenches the spa-
tial imprisonment of other groups.

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This is well established and of-
ten noted in the relationship
between capital and labour. Capital's ability to roam the
world further strengthens it in relation
to relatively immobile workers, enables
it to play off the plant at Genk against
the plant at Dagenham. It also streng-
thens its hand against struggling local
economies the world over as they com-
pute for the sake of some investment.

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But this way of thinking about time-space-compression also returns us to the ques-
tion of place and a sense of place. How,
in the context of all these socially-
varying time-space-changes do we think about 'places'? In an era when, it is
argued, 'local communities' seem to be
increasingly broken up, when you can
go about the world and find there the
same music as at home, or eat your
favourite foreign-holiday food at a rest-
aurant down the road - and when every
one has a different experience of all this
- how then do we think about 'locality'?
Many of those who write about time-
space-compression emphasise the inse-
curity and unsettling impact of its ef-
fects, the feelings of vulnerability
which it can produce. Some therefore
go on from this to argue that, in the
middle of all this flux, people despar-
etly need a bit of place, a sense of
identity, and that a strong sense of place,
of locality, can form one kind of refuge
from the hubbub. So the search after the
'real' meanings of places, the unear-
thing of heritages and so forth, is in-
terpreted as being, in part, a response
to desiring 'real' and distinct identities in
the middle of all the move-
mnet and change. A 'sense of place', of
rootedness, can provide - in this form
and on this interpretation - stability and a source of unproblematical iden-
tity. In that guise, however, place and
the spatially local are then rejected by
many progressive people as almost
necessarily reactionary. They are in-
terpreted as an evasion; as a retreat from
the (actually unavoidable) dy-
namic and change of 'real life', which is
what we must seize if we are to change
things for the better. On this reading,
place and locality are focused on from an
atmen of romanticised escapism from the real
business of the world. While 'time' is
equated with movement and progress,
'space'/place' is equated with stasis and
reaction.

There are some serious inadequacies
in this argument. There is the question
of why it is assumed that time-space-
compression will produce insecurity. There is the notion that people are
rather than simply deny - people's need for
attachment of some sort, whether
tofacial place or anything else. Non-
etheless, it is certainly the case that
there is indeed at the moment a recur-
descence of some very problematical
senses of place, from reactionary national-
isms, to competitive localisms, to in-
 troverted obsessions with 'heritage'.
We need, therefore, to think through
what might be an adequately progress-
ive sense of place, one which would fit
in with the current global-local times
and the feelings and relations they give rise to, which would be useful in
what are, after all, political struggles
often inevitably based on place. The
question is how to hold on to that notion
of geographical difference, of unique-
ness, even of rootedness if people want
that, without it being reactionary.

There are a number of distinct
ways in which the 'reaction-
ary' notion of place described
above is problematical. One is the idea
that places have single, essen-
tial, identities. Another is the idea
that identity of place - the sense of place
is constructed out of an introverted,
inward-looking history based on delv-
ing into the past for internalised ori-
gins against the struggle for a
Domesday Book. Thus Wright recons-
tructs the construction and appropriation of
Stoke Newington and its past by the
Domesday Book registers the place as 'Newtowne'...
There is land for two ploughs and a
half... There are four villanes and thirty

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seven cottagers with ten acres', pp 227 and 231), and contrasts this version with that of other groups - the white working class and the large number of important minority communities. A particular problem with this conception of place is that it seems to require the drawing of boundaries. Geographers have long been exercised by the problem of defining regions, and this question of definition has almost always been reduced to the issue of drawing lines around a place. I remember some of my most painful times as a geographer have been spent unwillingly struggling to think how one could draw a boundary around somewhere like the 'East Midlands'. But that kind of boundary around an area precisely distinguishes between an inside and an outside. It can so easily be yet another way of constructing a counterposition between 'us' and 'them'.

And yet if one considers almost any real place, and certainly one not defined primarily by administrative or political boundaries, these supposed characteristics have little real purchase.

Take, for instance, a walk down Kilburn High Road, my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary place, north west of the centre of London. Under the railway bridge the newspaper stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State. The postboxes down the High Road, and many an empty space on a wall, are adorned with the letters IRA. Other available spaces are plastered this week with posters for a special meeting in remembrance: Ten Years after the Hunger Strike. At the local theatre Eamon Morrissey has a one-man show; the National Club has the Wolfe Tones on, and at the Black Lion there's Finnegans Wake. In two shops I notice this week's lottery ticket winners: in one the name is Teresa Gleeson, in the other, Chumman Hassan.

Thread your way through the often almost stationary traffic across the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the window. Four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams of cloth. On the door a notice announces a forthcoming concert at Wembley Arena: Anand Midian presents Rekha Laxmee, with Amans Khan, Salman Khan, Jahl Chawla and Rapeena Tandon. On another ad, for the end of the month, is written 'All Hindus' phone or post, or in memory and imagination, their favourite haunts within it, the connections they make (physically, or by phone or post, or in memory and imagination), and the rest of the world vary enormously. If it is now recognised that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both.

Of the problems here has been a persistent identification of place with community'. Yet this is a misidentification. On the one hand communities can exist without being in the same place - from networks of friends with like interests, to major religious, ethnic or political communities. On the other hand, the instances of places housing single communities in the sense of coherent social groups are probably - and, I would argue, have for long been - quite rare. Moreover, even where they do exist this in no way implies a single sense of place. For people occupy different positions within any community. We have to compensate for the counterpoise to Kilburn the relatively stable and homogeneous community (at least in popular imagery) of a small mining village. Homogeneous? 'Communities' too have internal structures. To take the most obvious example, I'm sure a woman's sense of place in a mining village - the spaces through which she normally moves, the meeting places, the connections outside - are different from a man's. Their 'senses of the place' will be different.

Moreover, not only does 'Kilburn', then, have many identities (or its full identity is a complex mix of all these) it is also, looked at in this way, absolutely not introverted. It is (or ought to be) impossible even to begin thinking about Kilburn High Road without bringing into play half the world and a considerable amount of British imperialist history (and this certainly goes for mining villages too). Imagining it this wayprovokes in you (or at least in me) a really global sense of place.

And finally, in contrasting this way of looking at places with the defensive reactionary view, I certainly could not begin to, nor would I want to, define 'Kilburn' by drawing its enclosing boundaries.

So, at this point in the argument, get back in your mind's eye on a satellite; go right out again and look back at the globe. This time, however, imagine not just all the physical movement, nor even all the often invisible communal relationships, but also and especially the social relations, all the links between people. Fill it in with all those different experiences of time-space-compression. For what is happening is that the geography of social relations is changing. In many cases such relations are increasingly stretched out over space. Economic, political and cultural social relations, each full of power and with internal structures of domination and subordination, stretched out over the planet at every different level, from the household to the local area to the international.

It is from that perspective that it is possible to envisage an alternative interpretation of place. In this interpretation, what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus... If one moves in from the satellite towards the globe, holding all those networks of social relations and movements and communications in one's head, then each 'place' can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection. It is, indeed, a meeting place. Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to know. That moment in the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.

This is not a question of making the dualistic connections to 'the wider system' - the people in the local meeting who bring up international capitalism every time you try to have a discussion about rubbish-collection - the point is that there are real relations with real content - economic, political, cultural - between any local place and the wider world in which it is set. In economic geography the argument has long been accepted that it is not possible to understand the 'inner city', for instance its loss of jobs, the decline of manufacturing employment there, by looking only at the inner city. Any adequate explanation has to set the inner city in its wider geographic context, and it is appropriate to think how that kind of understanding could be extended to the
notion of a sense of place.

These arguments, then, highlight a number of ways in which a progressive concept of place might be developed. First of all, it is absolutely not static. If places can be conceptualised in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes. One of the great one-liners in Marxist exchanges has for long been ‘ah, but capital is not a thing, it’s a process’. Perhaps this should be said also about places; that places are processes, too.

Second, places do not have to have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures. ‘Boundaries’ may of course be necessary, for the purposes of certain types of studies for instance, but they are not necessary for the conceptualisation of a place itself. Definition in this sense does not have to be through simple counterposition to the outside; it can come, in part, precisely through the particularity of linkage to that ‘outside’ which therefo re itself part of what constitutes the place. This helps get away from the common association between penetrability and vulnerability. For it is this kind of association which makes invasion by newcomers so threatening.

Third, clearly places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts. Just think, for instance, about London’s Docklands, a place which is at the moment quite clearly defined by conflict: a conflict over what its past has been (the nature of its ‘heritage’), conflict over what should be its present development, conflict over what could be its future.

Fourth, and finally, none of this denies place nor the importance of the uniqueness of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced, but it is not a specificity which results from some long, internalised history. There are a number of sources of this specificity - the uniqueness of place. There is the fact that the wider social relations in which places are set are themselves geographically differentiated. Globalisation (in the economy, or in culture, or in anything else) does not entail simply homogenisation. On the contrary, the globalisation of social relations is yet another source of (the reproduction of) geographical uneven development, and thus of the uniqueness of place. There is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations. There is the fact that this very mixture together in one place may produce effects which would not have happened otherwise. And finally, all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world.

In her portrait of Corsica, Granite Island, Dorothy Carrington travels the island seeking out the roots of its character. All the different layers of peoples and cultures are explored; the long and tumultuous relationship with France, with Genoa and Aragon in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, back through the much earlier incorporation into the Byzantine Empire, and before that domination by the Vandals, before that being part of the Roman Empire, before that the colonisation and settlements of the Carthaginians and the Greeks... until we find... that even the megalith builders had come to Corsica from somewhere else.

It is a sense of place, an understanding of ‘its character’, which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognise that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.

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