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The Place: Encountering the Future

O Lugar: Encontrando o Futuro

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Today, postmodernists, drawing on contemporary acceleration, suggest that space, region, and place no longer exist. Recognizing that, at present, no subspace of the planet can escape the joint process of globalization and fragmentation, that is, individualization and regionalization, this text argues that each place is defined both by its corporeal existence and by its relational existence. It is in this way that subspaces exist and differentiate themselves from one another. Within this process of redefinition, the world - which, viewed as a whole, is foreign to us - has its existence revealed through place - that which is near to us. In place, we come to know the world for what it already is, but also for what it is not yet. Thus, the future, more than the past, becomes our anchor.

FROM METAPHOR TO CONCEPT: THE IDEA OF REGION AND PLACE

The literature of postmodernism is replete with geographical metaphors. This was also fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s in the writings of philosophers: Althusser, for example, with the regions of society (in the sense of instances), or Piaget, with regional epistemologies. Today, however, postmodernists of every persuasion draw on the vocabulary of our métier to suggest, on the basis of contemporary acceleration, that space no longer exists, region no longer exists, and place no longer exists either. Hence the references to the devaluation of territory (Badie and Smouts, 1992; Margolin, 1991), deterritorialization (Chesneaux, 1989; Steiner; Ianni, 1993), banalization and homogenization (Oliveira, 1977), the precedence of time over place (Virilio, 1984), heterotopia (Lacan, Foucault), and the emptying of time as a condition for the emptying of place (Giddens, 1991).

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But what, for example, are we to say of Michael Jackson? According to his manager, Michel Avram, speaking in October 1993 to a São Paulo newspaper, the most postmodern of globalized pop stars “does not remember South America. He thought Caracas was in Jamaica” (Folha de S. Paulo, 9/10/1993). In the cosmopolitan hotel where this idea is said to have occurred to him, one member of the team wore a T-shirt bearing the words: “My work is so secret that even I do not know what I am doing.”

Since geographers are sometimes accused of a similar alienation, the concern to produce, refine, and renew concepts becomes increasingly urgent, so that we may always know what we are going to do... in Caracas, in Jamaica, or anywhere else...

Metaphors reach consciousness, but in general they are far from providing the instruments for analysing reality. When Heinrich Heine exclaimed in 1848, before the miracle of the railways, that “space no longer exists”, he anticipated many other images provoked by technical progress over the following century and a half. At that time, geography was only beginning to forge its tools and had not yet acquired full disciplinary standing. Today, we know that concepts must be attuned to their time if they are to become operational, and for this purpose our inspiration is the history of the present.

In the distant past, the region was synonymous with the absolute territoriality of a group, with its characteristics of identity, exclusivity, and boundaries, given the unique presence of that group without any other mediation. Differences between areas derived from this direct relationship with their surroundings.

Today, increasingly, places are the condition and support of global relations which, without them (places), could not be realized, and the number of mediations is very large.

Regions have become functional places of the whole, spaces of convenience. Now, in this globalized world, with the expansion of the international division of labour and the exponential growth of exchange, an acceleration of movement and increasingly frequent changes in the form and content of regions occur in parallel.

We became accustomed to an idea of region as a subspace elaborated over a long period, a stable construction. Yet what makes a region is not the longevity of the edifice, but the functional coherence that distinguishes it from other entities, whether neighbouring or not. A short life does not alter the definition of the territorial unit.

Now, no subspace of the planet can escape the joint process of globalization and fragmentation, that is, individualization and regionalization. In the present historical period, technology itself “is implosive in its effects” (Schon, 1973:24-25). Accelerated

time, by accentuating the differentiation of events, increases differentiation among places, while the phenomenon of region acquires universality. Extending over the entire ecumene, it tends to subdivide it completely anew.

EVENTS AND THE SPATIAL PROCESS: SOLIDARY HAPPENING

Now that the unity of events across the face of the Earth can be empirically observed through the phenomenon of globalization, it becomes easier to verify the role of the historical process in regional re-elaboration.

Let us begin by admitting that the planet, as a material and human entity, is a totality and that, at each of its moments, history is also a totality. Both planet and history would therefore be realities in permanent transformation, becoming once again planet and history or, to paraphrase Sartre, totalities in a permanent process of totalization.

The international division of labour may be regarded as the energy of this movement. With the acceleration we are witnessing, a product of the concomitant evolution of science, technology, and information, the so-called “moments” of the division of labour have become far more numerous. At each moment, it is as though the totality were splitting apart, only to reconstitute itself in the next moment, when a new split renews the movement.

We would not distinguish between unity and diversity if we did not know that unity is proper to the planet and to history, while diversity is proper to places. The world changes and, at the same time, places change. Events bring about this connection between places and a history in motion.

Place, moreover, is defined as the functionalization of the world, and it is through place that the world is empirically perceived.

A subspace is a continuous area of homologous or complementary happening, of parallel or hierarchical happening. In all these cases, it is a matter of solidary happening, which defines a subspace, region, or place. The notion of solidarity used here is that found in Durkheim and has no ethical or emotional connotation. The point is to draw attention to the compulsory performance of common tasks, even when the project itself is not common.

In an agricultural region, this solidary happening is homologous. In relations between city and countryside, it is complementary, as it is also in interurban relations.

Yet within the same city, dominated by the same industrial production - as, until quite recently, in the production of children's shoes in Birigüi, State of São Paulo - it is possible to identify this homologous happening. There is also hierarchical happening, resulting from orders and information originating in one place and being realized, as work, in another. It is the other face of the urban system. This does not mean that one place commands another, except as a metaphor. But the limits placed on the choice of behaviours in one place may derive from interests located in another.

Both homologous and complementary happening presuppose a continuous extension, in city and countryside, contiguity being the foundation of solidarity. In the case of hierarchical happening, however, relations may be point-based. Here, solidarity is independent of contiguity. This is the difference between spatial proximity and organizational proximity (Gille, 1987).

In the first case, co-presence is a cause or an effect of action. In the second, it is a matter of teleaction (Moles, 1974), that presence of absent bodies, to use an image of the poet Paul Valéry. In the first case, what I am calling horizontalities is created; in the second, what we call verticalities. These are the new territorial configurations in the age of globalization.

The territoriality of historical happening is always changing, leading to the creation and re-creation of what Hagerstrand, in one of the scattered chapters of his Geography of Time, calls "domains". At every moment, there is always a mosaic of subspaces covering the entire surface of the Earth, whose design is provided by the course of history: scale ceases to be a geometric notion and becomes conditioned by time.

The distinction between place and region becomes less relevant than it once was, when geographical space was approached through a hierarchical and geometric conception. For this reason, the region may be regarded as a place, provided that the rule of unity and contiguity of historical happening is verified. And places - as the example of large cities shows - may also be regions. Both region and place are subspaces subordinated to the same general laws of evolution, in which empiricized time enters as a condition of possibility and the geographical entity as a condition of opportunity. Each practical temporalization corresponds to a practical spatialization, which disregards previous solidarities and boundaries and creates new ones.

PLACE AND ITS CONSTITUTION

Geographical space is formed by systems of objects and systems of actions, an inseparable whole (Santos, 1994). Each subspace includes a fraction of these systems, whose totality is the world.

Each subspace is jointly defined by a technosphere and a psychosphere, functioning as a unit. The technosphere is the world of objects; the psychosphere is the sphere of action. Objects, whether natural or artificial, are hybrids - in the sense proposed by Latour (1991) and Gras (1993) - since they have no real, value-bearing existence without actions. Thus, each place is defined both by its corporeal existence and by its relational existence. It is in this way that subspaces exist and differentiate themselves from one another.

The spaces of globalization (Santos, 1993), which I am calling the technical-scientific-informational milieu, contain different loads of technical content, informational content, and communicational content. Places, therefore, are defined by their technical density, their informational density, and their communicational density, whose fusion characterizes and distinguishes them. These qualities interpenetrate one another, but they are not interchangeable.

Technical density is given by the various degrees of artificiality. The limiting situations would be, on the one hand, a natural area never touched by humankind and, on the other, an area containing only what Simondon (1958) called the mature technical object, such as the business centre of a large city: intelligent spaces prepared to respond promptly to the intentions of those who conceived and produced them, far more perfect than nature itself.

Informational density derives in part from technical density. Technical objects, although rich in information, may nevertheless remain “unacted upon”, at rest or inactive, awaiting an actor. Information is completed through action. When, however, it is univocal, it is information obedient to the actor’s rules and introduces into space a vertical intervention that generally ignores its surroundings, placed at the service of those who hold the instruments of command. Informational density tells us about the degrees of exteriority of place, its propensity to enter into relations with other places, and the realization of that propensity, privileging sectors and actors.

Communicational density results from what Berget called the “human character of the time of action”, since the event may be seen as intersubjective praxis (Petit, 1991:31-38) or transindividual praxis (Simondon, op. cit.:248). This plural time of shared everyday life is the conflictual time of co-presence. As the place of solidary happening, whether homologous or complementary, place is this banal space of geography (and not the space of the economist, the anthropologist, the psychoanalyst, or even the architect or philosopher), creator of the solidarity and compulsory interdependence generated by the face-to-face situations discussed by Schutz. For this result, it is essential that “you and I have the same environment”, since “only in this situation [...] can I assume, with greater or lesser certainty, within directly lived (experienced) reality, that the table I am seeing is the same, and the same in all its perspectival situations” (Schutz, 1967:60).

Communicational relations therefore possess, more than others, a “geographic flavour”, a “bouquet géographique”, because they are generated in place and only in place, regardless of the perhaps distant origin of the objects, people, and orders that set them in motion. Informational relations are vertical; communicational relations are horizontal. Informational relations may be “indifferent” to the surrounding social milieu. Communicational relations are a result of the surrounding social milieu. The former are more dependent on the technosphere, the latter more on the psychosphere. This does not mean that technosphere and psychosphere do not interact; we are merely exercising a deliberate exaggeration of analytical discourse. In any case, under present conditions, informational relations carry with them the realm of necessity, whereas communicational relations may point toward the realm of freedom.

Thus, contrary to a currently accepted thesis, the opulence of places, to borrow a term used by Abraham Moles (op. cit.) in writing about information, would not derive from their technical density, but from their human density. There would therefore be places more or less oriented toward the present and others more oriented toward the future: those in which communicational richness is greater.

What, today, is the consciousness of place? Let us not become entangled in this question, the penultimate legacy of ideas established in an almost immobile world. Today, certainly more important than the consciousness of place is the consciousness of the world, obtained through place.

PLACE AND ITS REDEFINITION IN RELATION TO THE WORLD

Let us pause briefly to analyse one of the essential aspects of the present constitution of space. I refer to networks. We know that they are simultaneously global and local. They are global because they cover the entire ecumene and, in fact, constitute the principal instrument for the unification of the planet. But they are also local, since each place, through its technical structure and informational structure, accommodates a greater or lesser fraction of global networks. In place, they govern labour and (living) capital and determine their nature. As national or worldwide networks, they govern the international division of labour and determine the nature of cooperation. As local networks, they signify above all production itself. As global networks, they refer principally to the other instances of production: circulation, distribution, and consumption.

The work of people in an area may be viewed from this perspective: the work permitted and explained by a given technical milieu is also work directly or indirectly governed by distant regulation, whose objectives are sectoral, particularistic, and exclusive to a single intention. Such foreign rules are superimposed, challengingly and destructuringly, upon locally constituted norms. Through work, people ultimately discover this double reality, a path toward the expansion of consciousness.

The first union of people (in modern agricultural zones, for example) may well arise from a common interest in the outcome of locally realized production. The search for economic productivity in a given subspace may culminate in the encounter with political productivity, through the strengthening of solidarity, now in its emotional and ethical character.

This conflict between particular and local work and general and global work is the basis of a clash between objective culture, imposed from outside and obedient to the constraints of direct production, its techniques and norms, and subjective culture, inspired from within each person by broader considerations - a culture that becomes greater and more intense as the possibilities for communicative action increase. For Habermas (1973:22), while “work” is rational activity in relation to an end, “communicational activity” is interaction mediated by symbols. And for Abraham Moles, interaction is “the action that intervenes in, modifies, and disturbs other actions in progress, independently of them” (Moles, op. cit.:100).

In this sense, place cannot be seen as passive, but as globally active, and within it globalization cannot be viewed merely as fable. The world, under present conditions, viewed as a whole, is foreign to us. Place, that which is near to us, restores the world to us: if the world can hide through its essence, it cannot do so through its existence. In place, we are compelled to know the world for what it already is, but also for what it is not yet. The future, and not the past, becomes our anchor.

For all these centuries, we have lived chained to the idea that the past was the cement of societies and their guiding thread toward what was to come. It is difficult for us now to admit that these roles may be played by the future, and that we have always worked much more with the idea of resources than with the idea of project. Perhaps the preceding phases of history did not allow utopias to be realized. Today, however, with scientific and technical progress and the empiricization of totality, the world assures us that there are several possible - and viable - ways of constructing futures.

Place is the opportunity of the event. And the event, upon becoming space, even though it does not lose the marks of its origin, acquires local characteristics. It is as though the arrow of time bent upon contact with place. The event is simultaneously deforming and deformed. Hence the unpredictability of the event, which Ricoeur (1986) calls autonomy: the possibility, in place, of constructing a history of actions different from the project of hegemonic actors. This is the great role of place in the production of history, and identifying it is the great task of scholars of space at the end of this century.

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