Tokyo Lecture: Geography and Politics

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There are some very obvious ways in which there is a relation between ‘geography’ and ‘politics’ in the broadest sense. There is the issue of migration and of who can live where on the planet. There are battles over resources and who can have access to them. There is the whole realm of how and where to draw boundaries. There is the contested intervention, under whatever pretext, by companies and countries into the lands where others live. And overarching everything there is the challenge of our relation with the changing planet. All of these bring geography and politics together. They raise questions of our relationship to the planet and to each other, and of our rights to enclosure, settlement, movement. These are fundamental issues of philosophy and ethics. And they are geographical.

At a less global level, the internal geography of a country has an impact on how it works, economically, culturally, politically. In my own country, the concentration of wealth and power into one corner (the south-east region, including London) creates enormous problems—for the macro economy, where the imbalance imposes conflicting demands on policy; for inequality, with spiralling wealth and opportunity in one region at the expense of others; and for politics, where a glaring democratic deficit exists in the regions of the north and west. One way of encapsulating this is simply to argue, as I have long done, that ‘geography matters.’

And, finally, that is true too at the level of the individual and the local. Even the immediate spaces of our lives affect the construction of our identities. A young working-class person may find it difficult, for instance, to enter an art gallery. The façade is imposing, it speaks of authority, the place resounds with cultural knowledge. The young person may not have the courage to enter. And that effective spatial exclusion can make even worse the already-existing feelings of inadequacy, maybe of resentment. There is constant mutual feedback between lived life and the social construction of space. We *make* those spaces; and they are part of what makes us.

All these are different ways in which geography is part of our lives—in posing big questions, in influencing how

a society works, in helping mould identities at even the most personal level. And as geographers we should insist on this significance.

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However, what I want to argue now goes even deeper. One of our most basic concepts in both physical and human geography, is ‘space.’ By this I mean space as a dimension, as time is a dimension. Space, I would argue, as indeed have others, is the dimension that distinguishes geography as a discipline. My argument is that, if we conceptualise space fully then it poses real challenges to us and to society. And yet in society at large, and in the political realm, we often do not take seriously enough the way we think about space. In fact, in general people either do not think about space (as a dimension) at all, or they do their utmost to evade the challenges it throws up. Yet in fact the way we think about space, the way we conceptualise it, most often implicitly, influences how we live in the world and, I want to argue, can have deeply political implications.

Let us begin at the beginning. If *time* is the dimension of succession, of one thing after another, of development, evolution and change, then space is the dimension of simultaneous co-existence, of more than one thing existing at the same moment. Space as a dimension is a cut through the innumerable stories, trajectories, that are going on at the same time. Space is the dimension in which *right now*, as we are gathered together in this lecture hall [27th March 2014, 1500 hours–1630], the light of summer is beginning to return to the Arctic; it is the dimension in which *right now* things are happening in the Ukraine that we shall learn about later in the news (but they are going on right now); it is the dimension in which right now my friends back home in England are preparing to face a new day. Space is the dimension of our simultaneous existence, human and nonhuman.

It is therefore space that poses the most fundamental ethical and political questions: how are we going to live together? What will be our relations within this simultaneity? That is a challenge. *Space* is a challenge.

And yet, most ways in which we talk about space, in

ordinary life and in political discourse, avoid that challenge. In fact, we constantly evade the enormous complexity of the simultaneity of space. And this has political effects.

Here is an example. We often talk, certainly in English, about ‘travelling across space.’ For instance, we tell the stories of the European so-called ‘voyages of discovery’ and of colonialism this way. In this view, the colonialists travelled ‘across space’ and discovered and conquered new places. There are a number of things to note about this (implicit) imagination of space. First, space here is a surface (you can cross it); it is continuous, given and static. Second, this in fact coincides with the view of a number of influential western philosophers—Henri Bergson is one important example. In this view, third, space is the opposite of time. Indeed it comes to be defined as the *absence* of temporality. And fourth, in this imagination the explorers are the active agent. They are the travellers. They are the makers of history. In contrast, the places being ‘discovered’ are imagined as just ‘there.’ Such a conceptualisation makes it more difficult to see, in our mind’s eye, the histories those places themselves have been making.

What if, instead of thinking in terms of crossing a surface, we brought those other histories alive too, to imagine a *meeting-up* of stories? How might that change our imagination of space?

Here is another example. Sometimes, instead of implicitly conceptualising space as a surface, we do something even more radical—we turn it into time, and thereby obliterate it. Think, for instance, of the neoliberal capitalist globalisation that we are experiencing at the moment. It is a development glorified by many. Now, if those of us who are more critical point to the serious poverty some peoples are suffering (in Mali, Honduras, Mozambique) the proponents of this globalisation will tell us not to worry: these countries are simply ‘behind’; they will catch up. In other words, they are placing countries in a queue, with, probably, the USA, Japan and Germany at the front and Mali, Honduras and Mozambique at the back. However once again this entails an implicit imagination of space as a dimension, for the co-existing differences of world geography are here turned into a single historical queue. Geography is turned into history.

This is a way of putting the poorer countries *into the past*. All the big narratives, of development, progress and so forth, have a tendency to do this. The classic sequential nomenclature of developed/developing/underdeveloped has within it this same underlying implicit conceptualisation of space (or its absence, for it has been turned into

time). Anthropologists, as many of them now recognise, had a tendency sometimes to do the same thing as they conceptualised the field as somehow not only ‘out there’ but also somehow back in time. In all these cases what is at issue is a refusal to recognise the contemporaneous heterogeneities, the multiplicities, of space. It is, in fact, a *non-spatial* imagination.

Moreover it has important political effects. First, if all the countries are imagined as being in a historical queue, it implies that there is only one path of development. That there is no alternative. Moreover this single path will be the one defined by the ‘leaders,’ the most powerful. This is very significant politically. This is the implicit imagination of space that underlies the politics of the Washington Consensus, Structural Adjustment, and the general IMF-inspired imposition of neoliberalism around the world. (There is only one way to develop, and it is *our* way.)

Second, in this conceptualisation there is no possibility of countries defining a path of their own, an alternative model of development. In this imagination, their future is already defined by those at the head of the queue. Mali’s future is to become like the USA.

However, third, one can immediately see from this proposition that the picture is even more complicated—and worse, for such poorer countries are entangled in the unequal relations of capitalist globalisation today. And these relations hold them back, through the harsh mechanisms of the production of uneven development. So, the future that is on the one hand held out as inevitable, is on the other hand extremely difficult to attain. In other words, in that imagination of the single queue the present-day, exploitative relations of neoliberal globalisation are hidden from view. It is, in effect, a very clever political manoeuvre.

And fourth, this way of conceptualising the differences between countries as historical actually diminishes the real differences that there are between them. What is going on here is the erasure of geography.

Finally a third example. In human geography we often imagine the space of the world as always—already divided up, into nations, regions, local places. And those regions we sometimes imagine as completed and integrated things, with their own coherence, authenticity and meaning, even as bounded in various ways against an ‘outside.’ But this too is problematical. It is problematical empirically because with globalisation and the increasing degrees of interaction and consequent evident hybridity it is simply untenable. But more importantly it is problematical in principle, conceptually. In particular, it sets up an opposition between space and place, a set of binaries,

including:

Place	Space
concrete	abstract
descriptive	theoretical
full of meaning	no meaning
specific	general

In fact, these binaries do not hold. We can describe space and theorise place, spatial relations can have as much meaning as can a local place. And so forth. Moreover, the above binaries are bound up with a host of other dualisms, such as the one posed between masculine and feminine, which feminists have quite correctly challenged. So maybe we should challenge that idea of space too.

So, I have argued that space is not flat or static, not a surface; that we should not turn space into time; and that we should not imagine space as always-already divided up. Moreover there are three reasons for arguing against these ways of conceptualising space. First, philosophically there is a case for it. Second, all three are ways of avoiding the challenge of space (and thus one of the challenges that geography presents to the world—one we must pose to other disciplines). And third because that evasion has political *effects*, most of which are detrimental, both in the sphere of political debate and in our own personal cosmologies.

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So how can we draw on these arguments to pull out positive propositions for a more adequate way of conceptualising space?

Before beginning this, however, there is an important parenthesis. Most of what I have said so far has been, at least implicitly, about human geography. However I am aware that, in the UK at least, parallel debates have been going on in physical geography: debates about the significance of the model of space adopted in research, and about space defined by the entities within it rather than being conceptualised as a container. Are these debates going on in Japan? And could they be shared between physical and human geography, and help bring us closer together?

A first proposal for a reconceptualization of space, away from what was described earlier, is that space is the dimension of multiplicity. It is the sphere in which multiple trajectories co-exist. Without space, no multiplicity. Without multiplicity, no space. Moreover this is a multiplicity of stories not of static things. In other words space is full of temporality. We should not counterpose space

and time. What this means is that it is space that poses to each of us the challenge of the existence of others. Space in this sense is the grounding dimension of the social. A full understanding of space (the province of geography as a discipline) is thus fundamental to the social sciences.

This can sound very obvious. However, it is all too easy not to take on board its full import. For what is at issue here is ‘radical contemporaneity.’ This is space as the dimension of ‘coevalness.’ And it is amazing how often we evade this aspect (this challenge) of space. Sometimes we do not even see it. I have already given one example of this, in how that imagined sequence of developed/developing/underdeveloped arranges geographical difference into temporal sequence, and the political effects of that manoeuvre. But precisely the same kind of thing can happen in ordinary daily and political discourse. Quite often, for instance, we call ideas we do not agree with ‘backward.’ I found myself thinking like this about the Tea Party people in the USA, for instance, with their commitment to ideas, for me particularly on feminist issues, which seemed to me ‘old fashioned.’ (“How can they possibly *still* think like that?”) In other words, my spontaneous criticism of them was to put them in the past. However, as well as all the political effects that I mentioned in relation to narratives of development, there are further effects here. First, this way of thinking deprives us of arguments. To criticise a person, a group or a position by dismissing them to the past is to fail to take them on *politically*. The real reason I disagree with the views of the Tea Party is not because they are old-fashioned and I am thoroughly modern, but because I have political differences with them, and it is these political arguments that I must mobilise if I am to address them. Moreover, second, to dismiss to the past in that way is also to *disrespect*. People who hold views that others consider old fashioned have in fact come to their views for a reason. They hold those views *now*, they are not simply behind in some temporal queue. Just to dismiss them as ‘backward’ is to disrespect that.

The ‘radical contemporaneity’ of space is about a stance of recognition of others. It is about equality in mutual engagement, forming an imagined space of interaction. If we evade this challenge, which is a challenge the very fact of space presents to us, we do not treat others as equals. We relegate them to a past, when what is required is acknowledgement of our simultaneous existence in our difference.

So space is the essential dimension of *respect*, a point hinted at on occasions by the philosopher Jacques Derrida. Maybe we as geographers should make more of this

point, and put on the wider academic and public agendas the importance of a proper conceptualisation of space.

(It should be emphasised here that this notion of respect does not imply some liberal toleration of all our differences. Rather it is about recognition in the initial moment of interaction. After that, there may be fierce disagreement. What is at issue is equality of voice, a precondition for democracy.)

A second proposal for a reconceptualization of space is that it is the product of relations—of flows, interconnections, practices of engagement of all kinds—from the immensity of the global to the intimacy of the spatiality of the home. Thus, instead of that view of places as things that already exist, that we merely inherit, we should understand places as things that are *made*, that constantly change, whose character is in part a product of relations within the world beyond.

A first implication of this is that, instead of a politics of already-constituted identities (places), we need a politics of the *constitution* of those identities, a politics of *making places*. This includes both a politics of the negotiation of the internal complexity of places and a politics towards the impact of our places around the world, a stance of ‘outwardlookingness.’ Too often we have a Russian-doll imagination of care, affect, and responsibility—a spatiality of care and responsibility that prioritises the nearest (home and family, say) and decreases with distance, through local place, nation, and then maybe the world. Yet our interactions, our dependencies and our effects, spread around the planet and it is important to develop a geography of responsibility that mirrors that.

Further, all those relations, practices and exchanges that produce space are full of *power* of various kinds. One of the key concepts in geography as a discipline is ‘interdependence,’ the fact that we are all connected. That is true, but there is a danger of reducing it to sentimentality. What interdependence actually refers to is (a geography of) relations of power, what I have termed power-geome-

tries. We (individuals, groups, governments...) are all positioned within webs of power-geometries. And this raises in turn the general question of the ‘duty’ that derives from our particular ‘placedness,’ our particular location within all this power-filled complexity that is space.

Now, if all these things are true, then we need to reframe how we think about the relationship between space and place. For instance, if space is the product of relations (connections, practices, of power, care, duty, exchange, influence) then it is certainly not ‘abstract,’ it is not counterposed to place; it is as full of meaning as is place. In my understanding, space is the generality of all those relations, while place is a particular articulation of some of them in a location.

Finally, space is a challenge also because of the third proposal for how we should conceptualise it. This is, as is evident from what has been said above, that it is always being made. It is always ‘under construction.’ All those simultaneous trajectories I referred to earlier on—the Arctic, the Ukraine, my friends back home—will have moved on by now. The cut through them which is the space now, some forty minutes later, will be slightly different. Space has been reconfigured. Space, then, to summarise, is the simultaneity of all those ongoing stories and their power-filled connections. It is therefore constantly changing, constantly being made. To the degree that it is a social and political product there is therefore always the crucial ethical and political question of *how* it is constructed, and our duty in relation to that.

My argument has been that space is central to geography as a discipline and that the way it is conceptualised really matters. My experience, however, is that the fuller understanding of space that I have begun to outline here is not obvious beyond our discipline—not in the public arena, not in political debate, not even in many other disciplines within the academy. Geographers should therefore develop a strong voice in arguing the significance of these things.