

CALL FOR PAPERS

Workshop: Spatialising the social sciences in post-colonial contexts (May 2017)

This workshop proposes aims at creating a platform of debate between scholars engaged on the spatialisation of the social sciences and humanities on post-colonial contexts. In both the French and English speaking worlds, this spatialisation has been promoted in the context of the “spatial turn”. If in each case the necessity to enquire more systematically into spatially-influenced questions has been highlighted, one can question the coherence between the various ways this has been done. The debates traversing both geography and the social sciences and humanities remain in general suspended or even unnamed in attempts to bring the two fields closer together, while maintaining their vividness in their disciplines of origin.

Following the arguments made by a number of authors working within the structuralist paradigm in the social sciences and humanities, the awareness that geography matters (Massey and al., 1984) has influenced these disciplines toward what has come to be accepted as a spatial turn. This expression refers to the end of the relative disinterest the social sciences traditionally displayed towards the subject of space as compared to time (Soja, 1989), as well as critiques of the main trends in geography, especially following the positivist proposals made for the discipline during the second half of the 1950s (Schaefer, 1953; Bunge, 1962), which isolated it and its spatial fix. The critique of this positivist epistemological position, relying, among other things, on works from critical theory (Lefebvre, 1967, 1974), social movement studies (Castells, 1983; Tilly, 2003), and political geography (Harvey, 1973), has precipitated within geography an increased attentiveness to other disciplines, and within other disciplines a growing interest in geography.

The idea that space is a social construct that has to be examined in relation to the rest of the social world later led to a consideration of the influence the spatial has on the social. The understanding of space as a mere container giving shape to broader phenomena was gradually dismissed. While in the British context, the development of critical theory and a revival of Marxist analysis and, later on, an interest in postmodern studies, was at the core of this process, in the French-speaking academic world, a complementary debate took shape using similar sources, but organised along different lines.

The integration of critical geography and the development of Lefebvre’s arguments resulted in an interest in the spatial and, more specifically, an attentiveness to phenomena of exclusion. This led to the emergence of many studies on urban exclusion and the production and reproduction of space. Notably, this movement has more directly tackled the debate on the relationship between space and society, proposing a radical answer to it by questioning the validity of separating the two terms at all (Lévy, 1994; Séchet and Veschambre (eds.), 2006). And, the development of a pragmatic or contextual turn in the social sciences has led to a particular focus on the localisation of social phenomena, with references to space and its specific structuration (Briquet and Sawicki, 1989; Trom, 1999; Cefaï and Lafaye, 2001; Hmed, 2008). In summary, these developments seem to indicate that, as proposed by Thomas Gieryn (2000), space has found a place in sociology.

These contributions to an on-going debate have benefited from and had a particular impact on the study of societies in post-colonial contexts. The argument made by James Scott on the locality of categories in his critique of the notion of alienation is one example (Scott, 1985). More recently, studies have shown the importance of taking space into account when working on forms of popular resistance and political transformation (Bayat, 1997, 2010; Gunning and Zvi Baron, 2012; Combes, Garibay, and Goirand (eds.), 2015; Oslender, 2016); on lived experiences at urban and social margins (Doraï, 2005; Doraï and Puig, 2012; Dias, 2013); on the effects of transformations in governmental practices at the transnational level, and so forth. The specificity of some post-colonial approaches leaves room for considering the importance of the question of scale and the reference to an international order of power. This is especially relevant when analysing the way actors construct strategies and discourses based on a number of local knowledges and representations, which are often reduced to the order of the “traditional” without being investigated as critical reinventions, as Hobsbawm and Ranger explain (1983).

The aim of this workshop will be to tackle these questions and provide a cross-language and cross-discipline platform of exchange for scholars working at the intersection between the social sciences, humanities and geography, or broadly participating in the “spatial turn” in the study of the post-colonial world. As Edward Soja (2011) has observed, postcolonial studies and human geography have always enjoyed an intimate entanglement. The spatial turn, however, as he has also pointed out, has provoked new concerns within and in relation to postcolonial scholarship. In postcolonial countries, the struggle over territory – physical, epistemological, cultural, corporeal and others – meant that scholars from or working on such contexts were paying attention to space and place long before the spatial turn (Noyes, 1992; Chambers & Curti, 1996; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1994; Bhabha, 1994; Bhabha, 1990). How, nonetheless, has the increased attention to and production of critical spatial perspectives throughout the humanities and social sciences affected the study of space in the postcolonial world? As Soja writes, has it allowed for critical moves away from binaries like colonizer/colonized, East/West, North/South, capitalism/socialism? What other, non-dichotomous ways of thinking and narrating the postcolonial condition does the spatial turn enable? These are some of the questions we hope to explore in this workshop.

Although theoretical work is welcome, priority will be given to papers relying on some level of empirical investigation, including that which utilizes archives, the study of textual documents, or any other form of first-hand investigation. The topics the organisers propose to investigate are the following, and the propositions will cover one or several of them, according to the presenters’ interests and topics of investigation:

- Converging epistemologies, the theoretical stakes of the spatial turn
- Local, national, global... apprehending scales
- Locale as unit/subject of analysis
- Resistance and mobilisation in/for space and place
- Marginalisation, domination and resistance in and through the city
- Autochthony: local identity as a resource
- Material, symbolic, and political landscapes
- Spatial injustice and environmental suffering
- The production of discourse in public space
- Alter-political practices in the public realm
- The spatial dimensions of race, class and gender
- Neoliberalism and the privatization of the public
- Epistemological mobility and the shaping of postcolonial subjectivity
- De-territorialization/Re-territorialization

Dates and Deadlines:

The seminar will take place over two days during the second week of May 2017. It will be held at Oxford (University of Oxford). Precise dates and locations will follow the call for proposals.

Abstracts should not exceed 500 words and should be sent to both of the organisers at alex.mahoudeau@kcl.ac.uk and sophie.chamas@sant.ox.ac.uk, before the 15th of March 2017. Participants will be notified about the status of their submissions by the end of the first week of April 2017.

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