

Fragmented Places and Open Societies

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Human life unfolds simultaneously in three environments, biological, built, and informational. Analytically, they can be distinguished, but in practice they are inseparable. The way we construct our houses reflects as much our bodily as our cultural determination. The relationship among these environments, however, is unstable. They mirror and penetrate each other in historically specific ways. Much of the turmoil of our present period can be understood in terms of a realignment of these three environments, driven by a profound expansion of our cultural capacities as information technology is expanding into an all-connecting internet. In the following, I will look at how physical space is affected by this process and the challenges this poses to the future of society as an open political system.

Time and space are the fundamental dimensions of human action. One way of reading historical development is as an acceleration and expansion of society (interrupted by periods of deceleration and contraction). We learned, over time, to manage more space in less time. Technology played a major enabling role in this ‘time-space compression’. Cities grew into metropolises, a world economy emerged, the whole planet became interconnected from the 17th century onwards, in close relationship with advances in communication, transportation, and, not to forget, accounting. As profound as this development has been, it did not touch the basic definition and characteristics of space. Following Manuel Castells, we can define space as the material basis of time-sharing. In order to interact in real-time, one has to be in the same space which has always been a single place. Space, then, could be thought of as a series of places. One next to the other. Indeed, time-space compression meant that the relative distance between places was shrinking, yet their relationship remained characterized by just that, a distance which always expressed itself as a time lag in interaction. The assumption that entities which are in closer proximity can interact more quickly and that the time lag grows linearly with distance remained basically correct, despite the capacity to span time and space more extensively, quickly and reliably. Some time in the 1980s, this changed. The quantitative development of acceleration reached its limit. Yet, rather than space disappearing, which some postmodernists predicted as the ‘terminal condition’, what we have been witnessing is the emergence of an entirely new kind of space, aptly termed the space of flows by Castells, the first and still most perceptive analyst of this historical discontinuity.

The concept of the space of flows points to the emergence of a new material basis for time-sharing based on instantaneous electronic information flows. This has been long in the making, starting with the telegraph in the mid 19th century. Its real foundations, however, were laid in the 1970s when the development of the micro-processor coincided with capitalist firms restructuring themselves in order to escape a deep economic crisis. This created the push and the pull to incorporate into social institutions technology capable of generating and processing information flows. The space of flows expanded massively. In the process, the physical environment in which these institutions operated became restructured, too, by the logic of the space of flows. The key to this logic is that it is placeless, even if its physical components, quite obviously, remain place-based. Even a data-center is located somewhere. And the people who operate it have their homes somewhere as well. It is therefore not a coincidence that the major financial centers are still located in New York, London, and Tokyo, yet the dynamics of the global financial markets can not be explained with reference to these places. The same logic also infuses production of, say, clothing. Designed in Northern Italy, produced in Sri Lanka, marketed in New York, it is sold around the world in franchise stores which are locally managed, but globally controlled. What is emerging is a new social geography, highly dynamic and variable, which is no longer based on physical proximity, but on logical integration of functional units, including people and buildings, through the space of flows. The physical location of the various units is determined by the unequal ability of different places to contribute to the programs embedded in the various network. Whether production is located in China, Sri Lanka, or Bulgaria is, from the point of view of the overall operation, irrelevant, as long as the factory is capable of providing the required services competitively. In short, the connection between functional and physical distance has been broken. Yet, this is not the death of distance. Rather, it is being reconfigured into a non-linear pattern.

Thus, we have certain areas within, say, Sofia, whose developmental trajectory does not follow that of Bulgaria as a whole, but is determined by other free trade zones in emerging economies. Indeed, the very concept of free trade zone indicates that certain locales have been decoupled from their geographic environment. In a legally binding way, they are governed by a different set of rules than their 'host countries'. This, in itself, is not entirely new. Shipping harbors have always enjoyed certain exemptions from taxation, a freedom granted to stimulate trade and commerce. Yet, traditionally, these pockets of extra-territoriality have been located at the borders of territories, facilitating the transition between them. Now, these zones are sprinkled across territories, severely undermining national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This has been the stories of early 1990s, the result of commercially driven globalization. Fast forward to today. The ability to operate translocally in real-time has diffused through society at large, though quite unequally. Small firms, criminal organizations, social movements, and even individual people can network globally with relative ease. Thus, more and more places on which the social actors in these networks rely, are becoming decoupled from their local environments and determined by translocal flows of people, goods, money, and culture. These networks are highly specific. For one, they can easily adapt their components as changing demands or self-selected goals require. Thus, they only need to cooperate with those who match their own shared culture. Second, cultural specificity is not an option, but a functional requirement for networked organizations. Relying on adaption and cooperation, rather than command and control, they need to establish a distinct internal culture in order to build trust and facilitate communication. Corporate mergers, apparently, fail so often because the managers cannot fashion a new 'corporate culture' out of the two existing ones. In the process, the cultural differentiation between the networks is growing. From within the network, this appears as a process of integration and 'community' or 'team' building.

From the point of view of physical space, which none of the network actors ever escapes, this appears as a process of fragmentation and of increasing isolation of social actors from one another, despite the fact that they might share the same physical space. This process has advanced to such a degree that it applies to the highly connected as well as to the disconnected. In fact, the two groups mirror each other. In many ways, people are not 'more connected' than before, but rather, the connections which characterized dominant processes (even within the counter-culture) are increasingly made and maintained in the space of flows. The flip side of this ability to forge translocal connections is that those connections made in the space of places are becoming weakened. There is no need to relate to others just because they are physically present. Rather, places (and people) can be bypassed, rendered invisible from the point of view of those operating through the space of flows. This new form of exclusion applies to whole regions, but also to particular neighborhoods. It works on all scales.

In cities, this expresses itself through the twin processes of global homogenization and local diversification. We have a McDonald's in virtually every city of the planet. Yet, increasingly, there is no way to predict what will be located right next to it. On the ground, the many globals and locals mix in seemingly random ways. The result is a kind of a patchwork of cultures and their physical expressions jumbled together in agglomerations, sprawling metropolitan regions held together by fast transportation networks. These regions emerge without much planning, often they don't even have same (or, how are we to call the region, which can be traversed in either direction within a few hours, comprising London, Paris and Amsterdam). The people who live on, or travel between, these patches – the connected as well as the disconnected – are, quite naturally, building their own cultures that enable them to deal with this new fragmented reality, increasingly without reference to the geographic place as whole. Consequently, the focus of this new 'community' or network-centric culture lies on internal, rather than on external communication. Community-building becomes an end, rather than a means, to the degree that 'community' is one of the few concepts that is virtually always positively connoted.

This situation poses a great challenge to the projects of 'open societies', understood simply as political system in which those in power are accountable for their actions to the public and the fundamental rights of all individuals are respected. Historically, the institutional foundation for open societies have been liberal democracies. These are built on the assumption that people who live in one territory share certain values, or, at least, certain experiences. This communality is the glue that holds together the body politic. It served as the ultimate frame of reference in the endless game of compromises that characterizes the open political processes. This communality, however, is eroding as space fragments. Contributing to this erosion is the retreat of the state from the life of citizens, leaving them to fend for themselves. Thus people migrate – sometimes voluntarily, sometimes forced – into new communities, making them increasingly unresponsive for compromise and consensus without which liberal democracies do not work.

This is where we stand today. At the precise moment when democracy has established itself as the only legitimate form of government world wide, its actual institutions face a deep crisis. There are two trends which can be understood as a reaction to this crisis. One is the reemergence of authoritarianism, which does away with compromise and consensus, justifying its power with reference to security instead. It operates across fragmented spaces, indeed, the ability to selectively alter the rules governing particular places is a key technique of this new form of power. Its most extreme case is the zone outside the law established in Guantánamo Bay in

Cuba. But also more mundanely, special administrative zones where civil liberties are curtailed – in regards to drinking, assembly or just the presence of ‘suspects’, say, around schools – are multiplying in cities around the world. Within these zones, which can spring up anywhere, the state of exception is being made permanent. This tendency severely undermines the openness of society by deepening fragmentation in the service of power. The other, more hopeful and difficult, reaction to the crisis of the democratic practices aims at reinventing the local. This time not from the point of view of territorial and cultural unity, but as a ground on which differences can be negotiated. What is needed are cultural codes that can not only circulate within particular networks, but that can travel across all of them. A renewal of fundamental rights could serve as a starting point for this project to reinvent democracy in the space of places, using the space of flows to expand the range of cultural expression, rather than diminishing it.

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Acknowledgments:

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