

# 26 FOR SPACE (2005): DOREEN MASSEY

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For the future to be open, space must be open too. (Massey, 2005: 12)

## Introduction

On page 108 of *For Space*, an impassioned book that discloses the theoretical and political

challenges of thinking space, a map of part of the South-East of England is inscribed with a very simple if perhaps initially puzzling phrase:

The phrase recalls Rene Margritte's famous inscription below a painting of a pipe: 'ceci n'est pas une pipe' (*this is not a pipe*). Initially, like Margritte's phrase, it may seem odd – counterintuitive perhaps – since

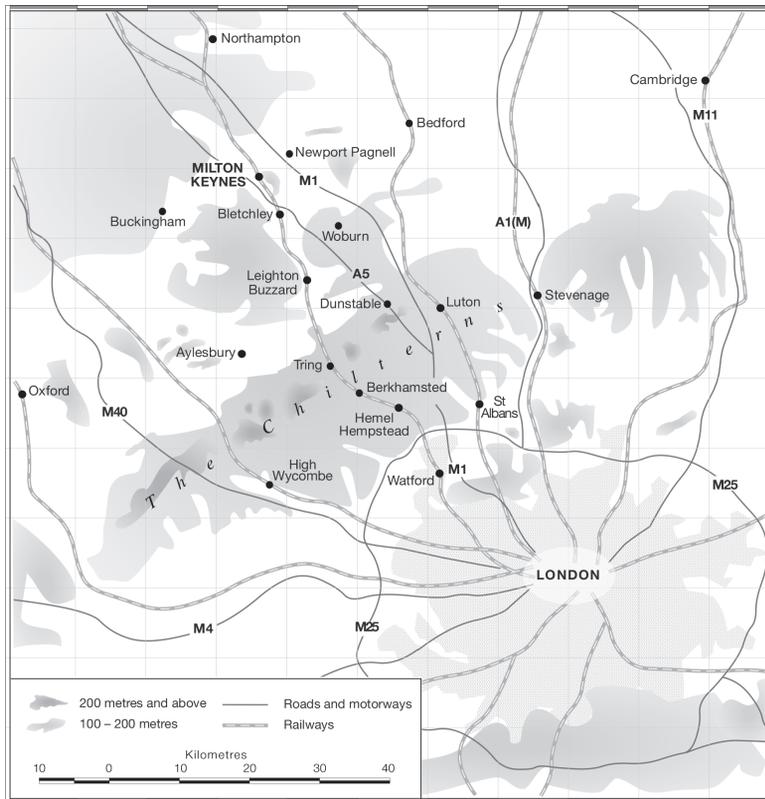


Figure 26.1 'Ceci n'est pas l'espace' (Figure 11.1 in Massey, 2005)

we are being rather bluntly informed that a map of roads and motorways, railway lines, topography, fields and villages is not space. Odd because maps have become central to how we think about and imagine space. Yet maps, perhaps those we are most familiar with, function by representing space as an ordered surface in relation to which the observer is positioned outside and above. Massey's point is a simple one that is now echoed in a critical literature on cartography – that hegemonic types of mapping represent space as a 'completed horizontality' – in which the dynamism of change is exorcised in favour of a totality of connections. Mapping is one of a number of ways in which the disruptiveness of space is tamed. Offering an alternative non-euclidean imagination of space, that disrupts this and other problematic accounts of space, is therefore the pressing task that animates *For Space*: a book that Massey (2005: 13) summarizes as comprising 'an essay on the challenge of space, the multiple ruses through which that challenge has been so persistently evaded, and the political implications of practising it differently'.

The basis to an alternative approach to space can be articulated in a set of three intertwined propositions:

- Space is the product of *interrelations*; thus we must recognize space 'as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny' (Massey, 2005: 9).
- Space is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of *multiplicity*; that is space 'as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting *heterogeneity*' (Massey, 2005: 9).
- Space is always *under construction*; 'it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed' (Massey, 2005: 9).

*For Space* is an argument for the recognition of these three characteristics of space

and for a lively, heterogeneous, progressive politics that thereafter responds to them. The three propositions therefore aim to enable us to ponder the challenges and delights of spatiality and subsequently open up the political to the challenge of space – perhaps disrupting how political questions are formulated, perhaps intervening in current arguments and perhaps contributing to alternative imaginations that enable different spaces to be.

The double aim of *For Space* – to simultaneously open up our thinking of the spatial and the political – resonates with Massey's work over the past two decades. From research on industrial restructuring and the social division of labour (see Massey, 1984; Phelps, Chapter 10 this volume), through to theoretical work on the emergence and disruption of power-geometries (see Massey, 1994), Massey has been a consistent advocate of the political necessity of teasing out the mutual imbrications of the spatial and the political. If *For Space* therefore chimes with several of Massey's abiding concerns then it also resonates with the emergence of a range of poststructuralist geographies that associate space with dynamism and thus qualities of openness, heterogeneity and liveliness (see, for example, Amin and Thrift, 2002; Doel, 1999; Murdoch, 2006; Whatmore, 2002). The other context she writes in is, however, the persistence of a set of problematic associations around space that we have inherited from a set of philosophical lineages and that are constantly articulated in contemporary politics. The first section of this essay reviews, therefore, Massey's critical engagement with other imaginations of space. Section two moves on to draw out the alternative conception of space that *For Space* outlines by returning to explicate the three propositions introduced briefly above. Section three then thinks through more precisely how Massey's alternative conceptualization of space offers and promises Human Geography a type of

'relational politics'. In the conclusion I raise a series of questions about the relational approach to space that *For Space* exemplifies and argue that what is distinctive about the book is that it offers a specific ethos of engagement which trusts that 'there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction (or not, for not all potential connections have to be established), relations which may or may not be accomplished' (Massey, 2005: 11).

### 'Unpromising associations'

The title of Doreen Massey's book, *For Space*, provokes a simple question. Why *For Space*? The title declares that space *matters*. That it inflects how we engage, understand and approach the world. So conceptualizing space should, therefore, be a pressing concern for us – it should cause us problems, make us think, and interest us. Yet the title is not *about* space or *thinking* space or *questioning* space. By declaring she is *for* space Massey affirms the possibilities and potentialities enabled by space(s). I will interrogate these possibilities in sections three and four but before we can disclose them we need to interrogate the 'unpromising associations' that, for Massey, serve to conceptualize or assume space to be simply the negative opposite of time. Despite the reassertion of space in social theory which has made space part of the lexicon of the social sciences and humanities over the past two decades or so, deeply ingrained habits of thought continue to tie space to a set of debilitating assumptions. These are assumptions that are fundamentally embedded in the framing of a range of contemporary problems. Central to the history of modernity, for example, has been a translation of spatial heterogeneity into temporal sequence. Different places are interpreted as occupying different stages in a single temporal sequence in the

various stories of unilinear progress that define the West against the rest (such as modernization or development). Talk of the 'inevitably' of neo-liberal 'globalization', to give another example, assumes both a free unbounded space and that globalization takes only one form. In both cases, and we can think of others such as the idea that space can be annihilated by time, the contemporaneous heterogeneity of the world is all too easily forgotten and thus difference erased.

In aiming to discern how such a taming of the spatial is also present in a range of philosophers and political theorists Massey's concern is not, it should be noted, simply with how time has been prioritized over space – a claim that has been central to the reassertion of space but is itself tied to problematic assertions that we live in uniquely 'spatial times' (e.g. Soja, 1989). Instead she interrogates how space has been attached to a set of 'unpromising associations' in the work of a set of theorists and theories broadly understood as either structuralist or post-structuralist (including Althusser, Bergson, Laclau and Derrida). She describes her relation with these theorists and schools of thought in strikingly affective terms. In relation to their treatment of space she is:

Puzzled by a lack of explicit attention they give, irritated by their assumptions, confused by a kind of double usage (where space is the great 'out there' and the term of choice for characteristics of representation, or of ideological closure), and, finally, pleased sometime to find the loose ends (their own internal dislocations) which make possible the unravelling of those assumptions and double usages and which, in turn, provokes a reimagination of space which might be not just more to my liking, but also more in tune with the spirit of their own enquiries. (Massey, 2005: 18)

Despite her puzzlement and irritation, the last line in this quote stresses that Massey's engagement with this range of thinkers is a reparative rather than dismissive one. Rather than condemn them, and in that act of dismissal separate her own approach from theirs, Massey's critique aims to disclose a range of new potential openings. Each of the theorists, and schools of thought, offer something to Massey's project. From Bergson she understand questions of the dynamism of life – of liveliness. Structuralism offers an understanding of how the identity of entities is made out of relations; whilst deconstruction heralds a constant enlivening interruption to space. Yet in her engagement with each she argues that space takes on a set of two 'unpromising associations' that either implicitly or explicitly tame space and refuse the challenge of understanding its singularity as the realm of 'radical contemporaneity'. First, a conceptualization of space as *static* that equates space with a stabilization of life. Space is assumed to conquer the inherent dynamism of time by imposing an order upon the life of the real – 'spatial immobility triumphs temporal becoming' (Massey, 2005: 30). Second, a conceptualization of space as *closed* and thus awaiting the enlivening effects of temporality for change or anything new to take place. Instead then of thinking space as the very condition of and for radical contemporaneity, that is the sphere of co-existing multiplicity, space is tied to the chain stasis/closure.

### Alternatives

It is because of the promise of space, that is what it could offer us or may give us, that Massey critiques the unpromising associations that, firstly, casts space as separate from time and then, secondly, devalues space by making it the negative opposite of time. In other words, her engagement with theorists,

and schools of thought, is animated by a belief that imagining an alternative understanding of space is a pressing intellectual task because it is simultaneously a means of responding to spatial politics. This task is therefore not only to critique taken-for-granted uses of space but to offer alternative conceptualizations that could help the difficult work of building alternatives to various 'power-geometries' – including neoliberal globalizations. Massey's positive alternative conceptualization of space can be placed in the context of a range of diverse engagements that think space and place in terms of relationality (i.e. where relations, types of connection or association between entities, precede identity). Such a move resonates with a set of trajectories in human geography that no longer conceptualize space as a 'container' in which other entities or processes happen. Instead, any space or place, from the intimate space of a body to the space of the globe, are precarious achievements made up of relations between multiple entities. Spaces have to, in other words, be made and remade because relations are processual. A named space, such as London or Newcastle, does not have a permanent essence.

Relational thought takes a number of quite different forms in Human Geography. Harvey (1996), in advocating a type of dialectical materialism influenced by a long lineage of process thinking, argues that space is made by (biological, physical, social, cultural) processes and that these processes are themselves constituted by relations between very different kinds of entities. Thrift (1996), advocating a 'modest' style of theory that he terms non-representational, conceptualizes space as a site of becoming that has to be constantly performed in and through numerous everyday practices. There is much that Harvey and Thrift disagree on, but what enables them both to be cast, like Massey, as relational thinkers is that discrete spaces and

places are permanencies that are only ever provisionally stabilized because of the multitude of entities in relation that they are constituted from.

*For Space* is perhaps the most detailed statement of an approach cast in terms of relations, and relationality, so it is important to pause and unpack in more detail the three propositions that make up the core features of Massey's alternative approach. First, in concert with the claims of relational thought, Massey (2005: 107) argues that space is constituted *through* its relations. Outside of these relations a space has no existence. There is no difference here between spaces we would, ordinarily, consider to be 'big' or 'small'. All are products of relations between all manner of heterogeneous bits and pieces (that are simultaneously natural, social, political, economic and cultural). Space is thus a sphere 'of dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations. It is always being made and is always therefore, in a sense, unfinished (except that "finishing" is not on the agenda)'. This means that, secondarily, space is the sphere of multiplicity because it is made out of numerous heterogeneous entities. Space is the gathering together of multiple openended, interconnected, trajectories to produce what Massey (2005: 111) terms that 'sometimes happenstance, sometimes not – arrangement-in-relation-to each-other'. This multiplicity means that space is the condition for the unexpected. Third, and consequently, space is an ongoing achievement that is never finished or closed. Stabilities and permanencies, a place that appears unchanging, for example, are provisional achievements that have to be constantly made and remade (even if this process of making and remaking is hidden or taken-for-granted).

An example that Massey uses that exemplifies how these three propositions function together to disclose space differently is an

example of a train journey from London to Milton Keynes. In a journey you are not simply travelling *through* space or *in* space (that is from one named place – London – to another – Milton Keynes). This would make space into a simple container within which other things only happen. Instead you minutely alter it – if only a little bit by virtue of your presence in one place and your absence from the other place – and thus contribute to its being made. Yet as space is altered – by your active material practices – the places are themselves constantly moving on and changing as they are constituted out of processes that exceed you:

*At either end of your journey, then, a town or city (a place) which itself consists of a bundle of trajectories. And likewise with the places in between. You are, on that train, travelling not across space-as-a-surface (this would be the landscape – and anyway what to humans may be a surface is not so to the rain and may not be so either to a million micro-bugs which eave their way through it – this 'surface' is a specific relational production), you are travelling across trajectories. That tree which blows now in the wind out there beyond the train window was once an acorn on another tree, will one day hence be gone. That field of yellow oil-seed flower, product of fertiliser and European subsidy, is a moment – significant but passing – in a chain of industrialised agricultural production. (Massey, 2005: 119)*

### **Human geography and a relational politics**

From this evocative image of spaces emerging, and passing away, during a train journey we get a sense of the delight, or perhaps even wonder or joy (see Bennett, 2001), that Massey fosters as she carefully composes her alternative conceptualization of space and

place as relational and thus fundamentally open. Another example she returns to is the place of Keswick – a town in the Lake District, UK – a town that is bound to the romance of the timelessness of the hills, a pre-given collective identity (based on a type of farming) and now modern practices of tourism. Using the case of a visit to Keswick by her and her sister, Massey argues that what is special about this place, and all others, is its ‘throwtogetherness’ – the way that very diverse elements that cross categories such as the natural or social come together to foster a particular ‘here and now’. This is what makes places specific – this gathering of diverse entities into relation:

**This is the event of place. It is not just that old industries will die, that new ones may take their place. Not just that Hill farmers round here may one day abandon their long struggle, nor that that lovely old greengrocers is now all turned into a boutique selling tourist bric-a-brac. Nor, evidently, that my sister and I and a hundred other tourists soon must leave. It is also that the hills are rising, the landscape is being eroded and deposited; the climate is shifting; the very rocks themselves continue to move on. The elements of this ‘place’ will be, at different times and speeds, again dispersed.** (Massey, 2005: 140/141)

In the example of Keswick as a particular place, and of the train journey as a type of movement, we see how the three propositions foster a shift in how we think about and encounter space – a shift announced in a proposition that Marcus Doel (2000) makes: echoing Massey and drawing on a range of poststructuralist thought he argues that ‘it would be better to approach space as a verb rather than a noun. *To space* – that’s all. Spacing is an action, an event, a way of being’.

*For Space* can, therefore, be read as attempt to think space as a verb – a move that ties

space to a set of problematics that have been seen as the provenance of time. How to think through the emergence of new spaces and places? How to live with difference within spaces and places? How to engage with the interconnections that tie together what we may consider to be ‘separate’ spaces and places? Space becomes, therefore, the very ground of the political because to think spatially is to engage with the existence of multiple processes of coexistence. That is, it opens up a type of relational politics based on the ‘the negotiation of relations, configurations’ (Massey, 2005: 147).

What is at stake is how politics makes a difference from within ‘the constant and conflictual process of the constitution of the social, both human and nonhuman’ (Massey, 2005: 147). How would a relational politics disclose and intervene in the constellation of trajectories that produce particular places or spaces? Massey offers three practices that follow from opening up the political to the spatial – that is to ‘the challenge of our constitutive interrelatedness’ (Massey, 2005: 195). First, a politics of receptivity that is open to the ‘throwtogetherness’ of place – the way that a place is ‘elusive’ because it is made out of multiple trajectories. Thus a politics of place would not be simply a politics of ‘community’ but would involve processes of ‘negotiation’ that would confront the fact of difference via ‘the range of means through which accommodation, anyway always provisional, may be reached or not’ (Massey, 2005: 154). The key, though, is that there are no portable rules because of the uniqueness of place: ‘the negotiation will always be an invention; there will be need for judgement, learning, improvisation’ (Massey 2005: 162). Second, and following on, there can be rules of space and place that cosily determine a political position, i.e. no spatial principles from which a position is simply deduced. Take, for examples, arguments about the ‘openness’ of particular spaces. These are

frequently fraught with contradiction. So those on the right of the political spectrum may argue for the free movement of capital but against the free movement of labour, whilst those on the left may argue for the free movement of people but against unbridled free trade. As Massey (2005: 166) stresses 'abstract spatial form, as simply a topographic spatial category, in this instance openness/closure, cannot be mobilised as a universal topography distinguishing left and right'. The key instead is to think through the relations through which the spaces, and thus different types of openness and closure, are constructed without privileging a-priori either openness, movement and flight, or closure, stasis and immobility. Openness is not the same in the case of the free movement of capital as it is in the free movement of people. Third, if a relational politics requires both negotiations due to 'throwtogetherness' and a politics of the terms of openness and closure, it also requires a politics of connectivity that takes account of wider spatialities of relations. The fact of connectivity raises a host of difficult questions about responsibilities that it is the task of a spatial politics to open up:

*It questions any politics which assumes that 'locals' take all decisions pertaining to a particular area, since the effects of decisions would likewise exceed the geography of that area; it questions the predominance of territorially based democracy in a relational world; it challenges an all-too-easy politics which sets 'good' local ownership automatically against 'bad' external control (Amin, 2004). It raises the issues of what might be called the responsibilities of the local: what, for instance, might be the politics and responsibilities towards the wider planet of a world city such as London? (Massey, 2005: 181)*

To finish with a set of open questions is therefore appropriate because what is promised by a relational politics is an expansion

of the problems that animate 'the political'. This is an expansion that is energized not by the laying out of a set of invariant principles but by the gradual emergence of a distinctive style or ethos of engagement with the world: an ethos that strives to be attentive to the consequences of our varied interrelatedness. It therefore resonates with other current attempts to foster geographical imaginations that engage the world differently in and through relational imaginations of space. Whatmore (2002), animated by a range of non-representational theories, argues for an ethos of generosity that would enable us to understand the complex entanglements that fold humans and non-humans into specific 'hybrid' geographies. Gibson-Graham (2006), carefully sketching a post-capitalist politics, offer a hopeful stance that would disclose the relations that foster spaces of hope in order to disrupt the mastery of neoliberal capitalism. By resonating with these and other shifts in geographic thought and practice Massey (2005) offers a means of thinking through politics of interrelations that is sensitive to heterogeneity of space and thus the genuine openness of the future, i.e. the very condition of the political.

Such an ethos of engagement with the world emerges from a positive understanding of space based simply on 'a commitment to that radical contemporaneity which is the condition of, and the condition for, spatiality' (Massey, 2005: 15). It therefore achieves two effects. On the one hand the relational alternative disrupts many of the taken-for-granted understandings about the relation between space and time that have a hold over the popular and political imagination and are also still played out by theorists that geographers are otherwise happy to encounter. Massey discloses an evasion of space and is sensitive to the ideological and hegemonic work that an association between space and the closed, immobile and fixed does. On the other hand, a relational approach to space

fosters the emergence of a new set of questions that force us to wonder again about the task of spatial thought. Massey constantly discloses how thinking space fosters a commitment to radical contemporaneity. These two effects combine to open up the political to the challenge of space and thus disclose a host of new political questions and problems and therefore, perhaps, the faint outline of a geography based on practices of relationality, a recognition of implication and a modesty of judgement.

### Conclusion

*For Space* exemplifies what a relational approach to theorizing space and place both offers and promises the ethos and politics of contemporary human geography. There are, therefore, a set of questions about relations and relationality that are emerging in human geography that may become central to how *For Space* is critiqued, evaluated and incorporated into the geographical imagination.

- On the one hand how do we understand the term 'relation' given that there are many forms of 'elation' (such as encounter, belonging, etc.). On the other, how do we

understand relations of non-connection – what we could term 'non-relations'?

- How to understand the durability of particular places or spaces? How do certain constellations of relations repeat and endure? Alternatively, how to disclose those space times that flicker out of existence or those space times that never came to be?
- How to understand differences in spaces based on size, i.e. how to theorize scale from a relational and thus non-Euclidean perspective?
- How to engage in differences in degree and in kind within and between the entities that make and are made by relational spaces, i.e. how are the capacities to act of a human different to the capacities to act of a non-human?
- How to engage with radical alterity from within a system of relational thought. That is how to engage with relations that remain unknowable, undecided or indeterminate?
- How to engage with other types of spaces that Human Geography is only beginning to encounter – such as spaces constituted through the circulation of images or spaces animated by the distribution of affect – or the multiple topological forms that relational space can take (network spaces, Euclidean spaces, fluid spaces, etc.)?

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