

The Physical and the Conceptual: Understanding 'Space' in the Modern State through Literary and Historical Theory

Mallika Roy Chowdhury (mallikarcindia@gmail.com)

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India



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Abstract: *Space is both conceptual and physical. My paper elucidates the ways in which conceptual space and physical space converge in order to serve the purposes of state apparatuses in the modernity that we inhabit, with close reference to literary and historical texts.*

Keywords: Power-Geometries, Praxis, Space, Theory

1

Introduction

Modernity and modernization have often been associated with an increase in mobility and therefore an emphasis on space rather than on place.¹ Space is the boundless three-dimensional extent to which objects and events have relative positions and directions². Space is however neither monolithic nor unchanging. Space is both conceptual and physical. Physical space is often conceived in three linear dimensions, although modern physicists usually consider it, with time, to be part of a boundless four-dimensional continuum known as space time. Physical space is different from the framework of "conceptual spaces" offered by Peter Gärdenfors which aims at a geometric representation of concepts.³ A conceptual space is a geometric structure that represents a number of quality dimensions, which denote basic features by which concepts and objects can be compared, such as weight, colour, taste, temperature, pitch, and the three ordinary spatial dimensions. In a conceptual space, points denote objects, and regions denote concepts. The theory also puts forward the notion that natural categories are convex regions in conceptual spaces.⁴ The notion of concept convexity allows the interpretation of the focal points of regions as category prototypes.

Debates are rife till this date among philosophers, scientists and geographers over whether it is itself an entity, a relationship between entities, or part of a conceptual framework. For a very long time, space was considered an important domain of thought and experiment for geographers and people of physics and astronomy. Engagement with space has come about recently within the realm of humanities even though the schema on time has been dealt with greater rigour in comparison, even though space and time are accepted to be in continuum. Immanuel Kant for instance believed that said that the concepts of space and time are not empirical ones derived from experiences of the outside world—they are elements of an already given systematic framework that humans possess and use to structure all experiences. Kant referred to the experience of "space" in his *Critique of Pure Reason* as being a subjective "pure a priori form of intuition.

Space is not a conception which has been derived from outward experiences. We never can imagine or make a representation to ourselves of the non-existence of space, though we may easily enough think that no objects are found in it.⁵

In Isaac Newton's view, space was absolute—in the sense that it existed permanently and independently of whether there was any matter in the space.⁶ Newton founded classical mechanics on the view that space is

¹ Klaus Benesch, "Cultural Immobility: Thoreau, Heidegger, and the Modern Politics of Place", *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2012): 403.

² Encyclopaedia-Britannica definition on space.

³ Peter Gärdenfors, *Conceptual spaces: The geometry of thought*, (New York: MIT press), 2004.

Gärdenfors, "Conceptual Spaces as a Framework for Knowledge Representation", *Mind and Matter*, Vol. 2(2), 2004

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, http://www.philosophindex.com/kant/critique_pure_reason/i_i.php Accessed on 09.12.2018, 7:42 IST

⁶ "Newton's Views on Space, Time, and Motion", *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/newton-stm/> Accessed on 09.12.2018, 07.48 am. IST.

distinct from body and that time passes uniformly without regard to whether anything happens in the world. Newton defined the true motion of a body to be its motion through absolute space.⁷

Modern understanding of knowledge has much to do with Newton's ideas on light and motion. Intrinsic to perhaps this Newtonian idea of space is mobility. Modernity, power, space and mobility play a significant role in Post-Enlightenment societies. Mobility's different aspects appear and take place in particular spatial settings under the workings of diverse forms of power, and recognizing this informs us about the making of specialized mobility.⁸ In a way mobility interacts with perceptions, experiences and desires of the modern self. Such workings of power relate, among other things, to framing and imagining, practising and experiencing mobility through bodies and spaces.

In order to understand the role of space and the formulation of 'governmentality' and 'bio-power', both Foucauldian concepts on the control of bodies through spaces by the State, we need to define spaces vis-à-vis places.

2

Space, Place and Power-Geometries

Space and place: There is a common sense feeling that space is more general while place is more particular. Space has multiple meanings: as a noun it means the interval between things; as a verb, to space implies putting in some sort of order. Place, in contrast is personalized space, occupied space. To know your place, to be put into place, is to be situated in a definite location. Space connotes to something that is empty, homogenous and infinite. Place is signified and specified. As if space with the addition of a history and human cognition can mutate into place through an epistemic engagement.

There are both sentiment and power associations behind these phrases. Space is a background, a container, but when transformed into a certain place, it is not neutral to the pulse of power. As Max Weber had famously defined, the modern state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory".⁹

According to John Rennie Short,

The transformation of space into place through demarcation, exclusion and containment are all embodiments of how and why power is wielded.¹⁰

To Doreen Massey, space is the product of relations (including the absence of relations). Space is a complexity of networks, links, exchanges, connections, from the intimate level of our daily lives to the global level of financial corporations.¹¹ Massey urges her readers to imagine spatial relations with the domestic space without a home for instance. How can the domestic and the household be recalibrated without the dimensions of a space/place called home? The notion of emplacement can be re-plotted in this dynamic understanding of space as well.

The most significant contributor in this regard is Michel Foucault who in his 1967 lecture on 'Other Spaces', later published in 1984 shortly before his death. In his concept, 'heterotopia' Foucault proposes ideas and new ways of thinking about space. Space, Foucault argues, has a history in Western culture, and it has always been closely bound to our experience of time. The progression and evolution of this history has marched on to new venues in recent time. Reviewing the transforming concepts of space through history, he analyses that the Middle Ages postulated 'the space of emplacement' which consisted of 'a hierarchic ensemble of places'. In seventeenth century, Galileo substituted the space of extension for that of localization when he dissolved the discrete and hierarchical spaces of the medieval era when he envisioned an infinitely open space, in which "a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement". Foucault considers this to be setting the tone for contemporary epochs, where space in modernity is qualified by

⁷Ibid.

⁸ Anne Jensen, "Mobility, Space and Power: On the Multiplicities of Seeing Mobility", *Mobilities* Vol. 6, No. 2, (May 2011):201.

⁹ Max Weber, *Essays from Max Weber*, (London: Routledge &Kegal Paul), 1946: 78.

¹⁰ John Rennie Short, *Global Dimensions: Space, Place and the Contemporary World* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004) :15

¹¹ Doreen Massey, "Concepts of space and power in theory and in political practice", *Doc. Anàl. Geogr.* 55, (2009: 17-18).

divergent sites. He argues that “we now exist in “the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed”.

He indicates that there has been a shift from a space of binary oppositions, of the open and closed, private and public, sacred and profane. Foucault set up the concept of site to introduce a new spatial type: The Heterotopia. The term, ‘heterotopia’ comes from medicine, where it refers to the displacement of an organ or part of the body from its normal position. The heterotopia is etymologically linked to another more familiar term, “Utopia”, which Foucault cites as a theoretical counterpart to the heterotopia. Whereas utopias are unreal, fantastic, and perfected spaces, heterotopias in Foucault’s conception are real places that exist like “counter-sites”, simultaneously representing, contesting, and inverting all other conventional sites. The heterotopia presents a juxtapositional, relational space, a site that represents incompatible spaces and reveals paradoxes.

An additive to this notion of Foucault is Doreen Massey’s interesting intervention on the multiplicity of space and the possibility that space is mutable, one that always in the process of being made and is ‘under construction’ as she opines.

It is never a fully connected and finalized thing like the «synchronies» proposed by structuralism for instance.¹²

Massey argues that there are always relations, which are still to be made, or unmade, or re-made. In this sense, space is a product of our on-going world. As a result, space is also always open to the future. As a result, it is always open also to the political. The production of space is a social and political task. Consequently, the dimension of space enters, necessarily, into the political. Disagreeing with Foucault’s view on space, she feels that since space is constantly being made and remade, a product of relationships and exchanges and intermeshed with this idea of space that is dynamic is the notion of temporality.

Doreen Massey urges her readers to consider that power has geographies to play within and that there are cartographies of power. To elucidate her point, she takes the example of United Kingdom; she says it is quite possible to discern power-geometries in politics, in the economic sphere through the geography of the relations of production and distribution, and in the cultural formation. It is also undeniable that the three — each of them strongly peaking in the south east corner of the country— feed off each other and reinforce each other. The spatial centralization of all of these power-relations in London is one of the cardinal facts of British society.

Inherent in this notion of power is the twin notions of modernity and motility. Someone like the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells would argue that movements have become defining features of the late modern city.¹³ Cities are planned and (also) practised in the face of the movements of its citizens, goods, information, ideas and images. Sven Kesselring considers mobility as a basic condition in the social as it is a ‘general principle of modernity’.¹⁴ Mobility’s foundational role in modernity naturalizes this as a fact of (modern) life and as a ‘general principle’ which rarely needs further justification.

With the notion of ‘motility’, Vincent Kaufmann bridges the gap between what he terms spatial mobility and social mobility.¹⁵ Vincent Kauffman defines ‘motility’ as ‘the capacity of entities (e.g. goods, information or persons) to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances’. Tim Creswell while studying the geopolitical strategies on the hurricane Katrina looks at the role played by State in handling the crisis. He demonstrates how the politics of mobility, i.e. deciding whom to move and when, how and where, had severe, at times fatal, costs for the under-privileged population of New Orleans, while the wealthier citizens

¹² Doreen Massey, *ibid.*, :19.

¹³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell), 2000: 90.

¹⁴ Sven Kesselring, “Pioneering mobilities: New patterns of movement and motility in a mobile world”, *Environment and Planning A. (Special Issue on Mobilities and Materialities)*, 38(2), 2006:270.

¹⁵ V. Kaufmann, M.M. Bergman. & D.Joye, “Motility: Mobility as capital”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28(4), 2000:74.

were able to escape the disaster.¹⁶

Rooted in the understanding of the State's power over bodies and spaces is Foucault's idea of "governmentality" and "bio-power". Governmentality, a key notion in Foucault's work, can be "understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior" More specifically governmentality describes mechanisms of linking forms of power to processes of subjectification through techniques of domination anchored in a certain regime of rationality.¹⁷ In this sense governmentality helps to articulate the strategic character of government. However, as Gyan Prakash critiques, Foucault paid little attention to Empire and hence did not explicitly articulate governmentality with the imperatives of colonialism.¹⁸

Building on Foucault's work, Partha Chatterjee embraced the concept in his seminal book *The Politics of the Governed* (2004) to describe state-society dynamics in the post-colonial world. He argues that the particularity of the post-colonial context is that techniques of governmentality predate the nation-state. Rather than securing state legitimacy by citizen participation, the state apparatus claims to provide entitlements to certain populations.¹⁹

An interesting case study on the Indian case by looking at Henri Lefebvre's work on the production of space and Foucault's idea of governmentality has been done by Swetha Rao Dhananka.²⁰ She says Lefebvre's comprehensive theory of "production of space" lends itself to understanding relations between space and social change.²¹ He presents a conceptual triad which expresses the interaction between spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation to trace the production of space.²² Critiquing Lefebvre, Rob Shields observes that articulating these three aspects of the "production of space" along with techniques of governmentality not only allows us to understand the spatial effects of governmentality, but also expands the scope of the conceptual lens that Lefebvre's "production of space" offers, as he has little to say on the question of discrimination and inequality.²³

Applying Lefebvre's and Foucault's theories, Dhanaka tries to posit and question their ideas looking at the Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP hereafter) in India. Using ethnographic surveys and interviews, Dhanaka concludes that the BSUP policy markedly influenced the built form and experience of it and the social relations in the slum. This conceptual approach pinpointed the tension between the scale of public policy intervention that targets a spatially constituted community, but implements it through individual eligibility criteria. A closer reading of this tension within the presented episodes leads me to identify three types of outcomes affecting the community targeted by policy. These form hypotheses that could be tested through further empirical investigations.

Within the discussion of production of space, it is also important to note the perceptions held by government agencies about the capacity of the poor to endure hardships. In none of the localities where BSUP housing

¹⁶ Tim Creswell, "Understanding mobility holistically: The case of hurricane Katrina", in: S. Bergmann & T. Sager (Eds) *The Ethics of Mobilities: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment*, (Aldershot: Ashgate), 2008: 78.

¹⁷ Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique." Presented at the Rethinking Marxism Conference, September 21-24, University of Amherst, MA, 2004. DOI : 10.1080/089356902101242288

¹⁸ Gyan Prakash, "Book Review: Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities." *Cultural Geographies* 17(2), 2000: 289-90.

¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

²⁰ Sweta R. Dhanaka, "The Production of Space and Governmentality in the Urban Poor's Claim over Land and Housing", *Environment Politics in Urban India: Citizenship, Knowledges and Urban Political Ecologies*, 2016:14. <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4228> Accessed on 9.12.2018, 12:45 IST.

²¹ Michael Buser, "The Production of Space in Metropolitan Regions: A Lefebvrian Analysis of Governance and Spatial Change." *Planning Theory* 11(3): 2010: 279-98. Retrieved November 14, 2016 (<http://plt.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/03/20/1473095212439693.abstract>) DOI : 10.1177/1473095212439693.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rob Shields, "Henri Lefebvre." Pp. 279-85 in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, edited by P. Hubbard and R. Kitchin. London: Sage Publications, 2011.

projects were realized in-situ were adequate arrangements for transit housing made.²⁴ It was assumed that community members could put up their tents and tin-sheets, as they were accustomed to living in abysmal conditions. Moreover, this worsening condition did not trigger speedier construction or a change in implementation guidelines. In regard to those communities rehabilitated to the periphery under the BSUP, it was taken for granted that they could and would start from scratch building a livelihood, enrolling their kids into new schools, and organizing for other lacking amenities, leaving the urban poor to ‘their own devices’ as had been formulated by Berner and Philips earlier.²⁵

Before concluding my paper, I would like to consider the role of sacred centres in the politics and bio-power in places like Ayodhya and Jerusalem- both sites of violent political and religious contestation. That power is both symbolized and organized from and through sacred centres implies that the centres’ social construction will have a politics. Not only will state elites attempt to control or counter the uses to which that sacred centre is put, but conflicts over the social order will ramify in its sacred centre. Several analysts have pointed to the role of rituals at the centre not as mere external instrumental legitimation of governmental authority, but as its internal expressive mechanism. James Duncan, for example, has illustrated how the struggle between two competing discourses and narratives of kingship in nineteenth-century.

As Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht argue, violence at the center, the provocation of conflict at a contested sacred center, was “a mechanism to control the meaning of the signifier, to build the religious significance of these national centers, a significance lying latent in the Palestinian, Israeli, and Indian nations.”²⁶ In the case of Jerusalem and Ayodhya, contesting possession of a sacred site was used by groups wishing to change the basis of governmental authority from a nation grounded in mutual consensus and democratic laws to a religion-ethnic group grounded in divine providence. Bodies are social, and spaces and places are no less social and political. The use of space for localization, displacement, and emplacement of bodies has predated modernity but has not eluded the modern or post-modern condition.

²⁴ Shweta Rao Dhanaka, op.cit.

²⁵ Erhard Berner and Benedict Philips, . “Left to Their Own Devices? Community Self-Help between Alternative Development and Neo-Liberalism.” *Community Development Journal* 40(1): 2005, 17–29, DOI : 10.1093/cdj/bsi003

²⁶ Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, “The Bodies of Nations: A Comparative Study of Religious Violence in Jerusalem and Ayodhya”, *History of Religions*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Nov., 1998) 148.

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Author Note

Ms. Mallika Roy Chowdhury is a doctoral candidate at Jadavpur University. Her doctoral thesis is on Print Culture and the New Woman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. She has obtained her M.Phil, Degree in Modern History from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016. Her MPhil thesis focussed on different forms of visual culture and the cultural politics of early-late twentieth-century Bengal. She has earned her MA degree in Modern History from CHS, JNU. She stood third with a first-class degree with History honours from the University of Calcutta. She has served as a lecturer at Loreto College (University of Calcutta) and Amity University Kolkata and has presented papers at national and international seminars and conferences. She has also served as a Research Fellow for different projects on the history and heritage of Kolkata.