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Notes on the Spatial Turn

On the basis of ever-mounting evidence, amongst which is the “zone” problematic of the Zadar conference that occassioned these notes, it can be concluded that the spatial turn has insinuated itself as an all-pervading heuristic tool throughout the humanities and the social sciences. The extent to which space and spatiality have usurped the central stage in the various branches of reasearch can be gauged by admonishments that what we are witnessing is a new fundamentalism that has simply inverted the terms of the dualism of time and space (May and Thrift 2001: “Introduction”). According to Michael Dear the sway of space is manifested in multifold ways: in the ubiquity of spatial analysis in social theories and practices; in the explosion of publications devoted to the exploration of the interface of the social and the spatial; in the reintegration of human geography into various domains of knowledge; in the focus given to difference and the consequent diversification of theoretical and empirical practices; in a theoretically informed exploration of the relation between geographical knowledge and social action; and, finally, in the unprecedented proliferation of research agendas and publications pertaining to these isuuses (Dear 2001: 24). Two recent collections of papers are indicative of the ubiquity of spatial issues in scholarly work.

The editors of the first one, The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (2009), Barney Warf and Santa Arias argue for the coherence of the collected articles, formulating their common point of departure as follows: „the insistence that no social or cultural phenomenon can be torn from its spatial context, that geography is not some subordinate afterthought to history in the construction of social life, that no meaningful understanding of how human beings produce and reproduce their worlds can be achieved without invoking a sense that the social, the temporal, the intellectual, and the personal are inescapably always and everywhere also the spatial“ (Warf 2009: 7). The fact that the editors of the second collection, Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann, chose an English title for their volume, Spatial Turn , while focusing its content by the German subtitle Das Raumparadigma

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in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften (2008) bespeaks, of course, a certain anxiety with the word/concept of space („Raum“) in the German context. Jörg Dünne addressses this anxiety when he describes his disassociation from „physical space and territoriality“ because, as he states, „geopolitics supported National Socialist policies precisely through the amalgamation of physical and social space“ (Döring 2008: 51). The question to what extent have political considerations bracketted off an important body of knowledge from the spatial turn – to be more precise, the profound insights of the German geographical tradition as presented in the collection – I will no more than adumbrate here. My reconsideration of the spatial turn, whose heuristic value I duly recognize and whose potential I have pursued elsewhere, was not prompted by the lopsided nature of intercultural mediations but rather by the link which connects these two collections.

Namely, Edward Soja's work , who was the plenary speaker at the Zadar conference, participated in both book projects. In both articles, the self-proclaimed „evangelist of space“ speaks of the „parity of space and time“ (Warf 2009:18) and, relying on Foucault, dates the origins of the obsession with history to the second half of the nineteenth century when, according to Soja, a rupture occured which he describes „as a far-reaching ontological distortion of Western thought“ (Warf : 19) („ontologische Verzerrung“ (Döring 2008:245) in the German publication. Disregarding the truth value of such a diagnosis, the rhetorical force of such a diagnosis is clearly evident. I surmise that it is precisely because of a certain unease with the apodictic nature od such a pronouncement that Soja returned to this issue in his latest publication Seeking Spatial Justice (2010) where he now speaks of „ontological assumptions“which „are not tested against reality but logically asserted to define what it is that all humans share in just being alive“ (Soja 2010:69). My feeling is that in distinguishing between reality and logic Soja is letting slip the full weight of the earlier ontological argument. Soja goes on to assert that social theories and their attendant epistemologies „have been based on and shaped by almost subliminal assumptions that focus attention primarily on the social and temporal or historical spects of being much less emphatically on life's fundamental spatiality“ (Soja 2010:70). Now he emphatically states: „This ontological distortion … did not always exist“ (Soja 2010:70). In each of these statements , Soja is implying, sometimes with more sometimes with less rhetorical force, that the spatial turn, to which he has

undoubtedly made such a huge contribution, stages an epochal ontological break with all the implications attending such a pronouncement.

However, if, for example, one approaches the matter from a longer perspective the epochal character of this distortion is open to scepticism. Within that perspective, the diagnosis of the marginalization of space would have to take into account the fact that in Western thought the parity of space and time has been marked by a different hierarchy. In his magisterial study Metamorfoze metafizike (Metamorphoses of Metaphysics) (1999) the Croatian philosopher Marijan Cipra dwells upon the function of space in Greek philosophy and at one point remarks: „This is why space is in a specific manner the principle of order and structure amongst things. For Aristotle this ordering resemblance between the principle of form and space is an additional reason for ascribing to space a privileged place amongst his principles“ (Cipra 1999:260). I mention a philosopher in this context because I believe that a reconsideration of the spatial turn which works with a longer time frame and a broader disciplinary horizon relativizes its claims to epochal significance.

Furthermore, if we return to Soja's account of the „ontological distortion“ and the „obsession with history“, it is clear that he conflates history and time. What lamentations over the denigartion of space regularly fail to recognize is that the target of their critique and what they seek to establish a parity with is not time but history. To corroborate this claim one can simply point to the fact that there does not exist a discipline whose subject matter is time as such. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Helga Nowotny has voiced a plea for an interdisciplinary study of time which would deal and treat time as the spatial turn has done with space (Nowotny 2005). Therefore, returning to Soja's dating of a „distortion“ in the nineteenth century , we can say that what happened was not a disbalanced priviliging of one category of human existence (time) over another (space) but rather the growing domination of those explanatory models which approach reality by way of historical experience. Stephen Kern drew attention to the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century Dilthey proposed history as being the foundation of all knowledge and argued for the primacy of the historical method for all social sciences (Kern 1983: 78). If a distortion did occur during the said period, we can say that it did not occur on the ontological but on the epistemological level. Put otherwise, consequential to the said distortion the status of geography was undermined.

The paradoxical reluctance to name geograhy as the enabling condition of the spatial turn can be recognized if we return to Foucault. Numerous commentators have cited his pronouncements on the „devaluation of space“, his hesitancy to precisely date it („Did it start with Bergson, or before?) and the explanation he gives for this devaluation: „Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic“ (Foucault 1980:70). However, if we return to the interview Foucault gave the editors of the journal Hérodote (1976) where he made these statements and aanalyze the strategy pursued by the interviewers, „questions on geography“, as the text is named, come to the fore. The interviewers begin their dialogue with Foucault by expressing their surprise over his „silence about geography“ commenting later on that his „work seems to have been constantly bordering on geography without ever taking it explicitly into account“ (Foucault 1980:65). Their strategy of drawing attention to what they deem a blind spot in Foucault's work ultimately bears fruit when Foucault acknowledges: „Now I can see that the problems you put to me about geography are crucial ones for me. Geography acted as the support, the condition of possibility for the passage between a series of factors I tried to relate“ (Foucault 1980:77). His last remark summarizes this dawning knowledge: „Geography must indeed necessarily lie at the heart of my concerns“ (Foucault 1980:77).

One of the reasons why this aspect of Foucault's connection to the spatial turn has been underplayed has to do, I believe, with the need of its „evangelists“ to argue for and promulgate its epochal significance. On the evidence of the numerous „turns“ that we have witnessed in the not too distant past, the evangelist of space are simply repeating a gesture of self-legitimation. However, if one seriously acknowledges, as Soja admittedly does, that the undervaluation of space was not always in place, the radical nature of the turn is attenuated. A retrieval of the pre-distortion dominance of space, particulraly in philosophy – something that the spatial turn thinkers have not done – would relativize the significance of the turn and show it to be a discursive formation spawned by an interdisciplinary conjuncture addressing a particular time and place. My quotation from Marijan Cipra only indicates the direction this sort of retrieval would have to take. Sceptical that the spatial turn redresses a rupture on the ontological level and humbled by the task of conceptualizing its implications if it did occur, I restrict myself to a few observations on geography as a discipline.

In his article „The Humboldt Connection“, David Harvey points to a time when „geographical knowledge stretched across everything there was …and was also implicated in the construction of all manner of other specialized knowledges“ and goes on to observe that the nineteenth century chaged all that: „Knowledge got carved up and fragmented into distinctive disciplines. As the century wore on, knowledge became more and more professionally organized, and, as the word discipline only too directly announces, was policed and put under surveillance by a whole apparatus of group identifications and evaluations. Geography, as a distinct discipline, got squeezed into an uncomfortable corner“ (Harvey 1998:724). Writing about the U.S. academy, Neil Smith contends that „geography faired badly in the scramble for disciplinary turf“ which in some quarters led „to a defensive concern with the discipline's essential character and an effort to police its borders against would be intruders“ (Smith 2004:257). Wary of the ontolgical argument, I argue that this is the background one has to keep in mind when assessing the significance of the spatial turn, the way it has been implemented in different research agendas and the results that it has produced.

Within that context, David Harvey's succinct judgement that „Geography is too important to be left to geographers“ (Harvey 2001:116) can serve as an assessment which inuagurates a rethinking of geographical knowledge. Not only does it point to a need to salvage it from its ghettoized position but the demand it voices to engage those outside the discipline in addressing geographical issues opens up the disciplinary agenda to all kinds of theoretical knowledge. The desired aim of this crosspollination was both a revitalization of geographical categories and an attendant broadening of the scope, depth and relevance of theory itself. Harvey remarks upon the potential of this interdisciplinary dialogue when he writes: „Whenever social theorists of whatever stripe actively interrogate the meaning of geographical categories and relations, they are forced either to make so many ad hoc adjustments to their theory that it splinters into incoherency, or else to abandon their theory in favor of some language derived from pure geometry“ (Harvey 2001:118). My feeling is that the spatial turn has made only superficial „adjustments“ within different theoretical paradigms and that they have continued to ignore what Harvey names „the materialities of actual geographical configurations“(Harvey 2001:118). Harvey first wrote those words in 1984 and I think that the subsequent wholesale appropriation of the spatial turn did little in disproving his reading. The

„reassertion of space in social theory“, to quote Soja's well-known slogan (Soja 1989), a potent intervention in the research agendas of various disciplines during the last couple of decades, has all too often, particularly in the work of cultural theorists, done very little more than use space as a jack-of-all-trades metaphor.

The spatial turn, which to a certain extent I read as responding to a rampant etherization attending theory, has itself been taken over and evacuated of exactly that anchorage which it sought to bring into prominence. This is a consequence of the prevailing social constructionism and the modes of enquiry it has spawned, in which reality is the always the product of human interpretation. Although I recognize the exciting possibilities opened up by the constructivist argument and am aware of „the contingency of knowledge claims about 'real world' entities“ (Whatmore 2002:2), I nevertheless find it difficult to accept the idea that the world is, in Sheets-Johnstone's phrasing, „the product of an immaculate linguistic conception“ (Sheets-Johnstone 1992:46). If anything, the spatial turn, in my opinion, registers a conjucture in which „the world kicks back“ (Barad 1999) or as Bruno Latour formulates it „when things strike back“ (Latour 1999). In a discussion of Science and Technology Studies, Bruno Latour makes the following observation: „And in this case it also backfires because it reveals that when the social scientists claim to comprehend something they have left aside what the thingness of this thing actually is! Either they destroy what they study or ignore what it is“ (Latour 1999:112). Returning to my problematic, if space is to be reasserted into our various theoretical protocols it needs to retain its quiddity and not be evacuated of its materiality. Otherwise it will not make the difference that I think it has the potential to make and to reveal.

The truth of this assessment was brought home to me in various ways on the occassion which prompted these notes. Namely, the sporadic references to the spatial turn during the Zadar „zone“ conference indicated the unequal – geographical -dissemination of its agenda, methodologies and findings. The absence of geographers at a conference devoted to exploring an exemplary spatial issue – the multifold meanings of the zone - indicated a rift in „disciplinary turf“ that is debilitating in a number of ways. Apparently, geographers did not register or were unable to meet the challege that the agenda of the conference had placed before their discipline. In Neil Smith's formulation, they continue to police the borders of geography against would be intruders, simply ignoring what, I

am certain, can only enrich geography and give it relevance. On the other hand, without the anchoring sobriety of geographical knowledge the concept of the zone was all too frequently approached as a mere metaphor. To localize my remarks, I opine that the concept of the zone, thusly dematerialized, did not live up to the critical potential it had in the geographical setting of the conference. If the stricter meaning of zone/zoning had been retained, that is if the concept had been geographically substantiated, I believe it could have provided a mapping of reality that would have had a more than scholarly interest and that would have provided a topical focus for the „radical spatiality“ that was indicated by the subtitle of the conference.

To be more explicit: the issue of the zone had the potential to instigate a concerted exploration of how the post-socialist world and the processes of privatization have in large part been permeated by geographical matters, to be more precise, by various implementations of zoning. Whether one thinks of political demarcations, public housing, the privatization of public lands, city plans – to give just a few examples of capitalism's commodifying rationale – we see everywhere the dynamic of the zone whose basic work is simultaneously to exclude and to include and to subsequently embody power within thusly demarcated space. Therefore, my response to the topic of the zone was not to metaphorize it but rather to think the material practices which it refers to. Strangely enough, the very use of the word zone/zoning implies a spatial differentiation because the full semantic force of the word is not retained when the English original is used in Croatian translation. A brief glance at its American usage clearly indicates the spatial practices involved but also provides reference points to measure the processes evident in the more immediate, Croatian, environment.

For my purpose two American instances will suffice: Michael Allan Wolf, defining zoning as a land-use regulatory tool, describes a court case where reformers used this tool, designed to protect health and safety and to promote the general welafare, in their struggle against conservative defenders of private property (Wolf 2008). William K. Tabb and Larry Sawers provide a more critical account of this „production of space“: „ The first zoning laws enacted in the United States, for example, appeared in New York City during the 1910s. A group of downtown business interests had banded together to develop the legislation which would discourage industry and the workers it employed from encroaching on prime real estate of the central business district. Those who were

active in the zoning campaign served as a nucleus for a group of privately-sponsored planners under the auspices of the newly organized Regional Plan Association. They quickly developed a comprehensive plan for New York City. The plan actually implemented by the public official Robert Moses is almost an excat duplicate of the one presented to him by this group of capitalists“ (Tabb 1984:11). The heuristic value of the notion of the zone in mapping the reality of societies that are going through a process of the privatization of the commons is more than evident. It is more than obvious which of these two models of zoning hold sway in contemporary Croatian spatial practices.

But, in conclusion, I put the Croatian experience within a larger perspective and look at it as a minuscule site on the map of the post-Cold War world. William F. Connolly has remarked that the world is marked „by asymmetrical zones of speed“ (Connolly 2002:143). Poignantly illustrating how geographical spaces imply a certain temporality he makes the following contention: „The acceleration of the fastest zones – and the consequent accentuation of difference in tempo between the fast and slow processes – forms a constitutive dimension of the late-modern condition“ (Connolly 2002:141). According to Connolly, this discrepancy of zones of time contributed to collapse of the Soviet Union because it could not avoid the accelarating processes of its counterpart nor could it absorb them into its political economy. Of course the same is true for other polities where we can also see how, as he writes, „compex, contingent transstate formations materialize specific zones of life“ (Connolly 2002:150). These formations, which I would identify as the logic of capital, implicate space in their realization or actualization. From one such polity the geography that unfolds prompts me to ask a question which John Allen formulates in the following manner: „How is it possible for certain groups to be able to abstract out the daily routines and practices of others? If the stress is placed upon the domination of space (rather than simply over space), then presumably this must involve the closing down of possibilities, the restricion of alternative uses, so that others have little choice but to acknowledge the construction of a singular space – even thogh they may imagine themselves moving within and around it“ (Allen 2003:162). Zoned into any such geography that has been produced by the commodifying rationale, one recognizes its resemblance to a description of the Gulf Opportunity Zone written by Darwin Bond-Graham in the wake of Hurricane Katrina: „For those familiar with corporate globalization-talk, an

„opportunity zone“ is a synonym for „enterprise zone,“ and also closely related to the various other „zones“ of special exploitation carved out by states for the benefit of capital“.

Having thus traversed a path through an ontological distortion, by way of disciplinary signposts I have arrived into a zone whose structuring core seems to me to be that of capital. Abstaining once more from ascribing to the latter ontological priority I will note that the imbrication of geography and capital has been noted not only by radical geographers but by mainstream writers such as Allen Scott who maintains that geography „is not simply a passive frame of refernce, but an active ingrediant in economic developement and growth“ (Scott 2006:83). I readily concede this point. What I find it harder to accept is the apodicticity of tha political claims made for the spatial turn such as we recognize in David Harvey who maintains that the junction between geography and social theory „is one of the crucial flash-points for the crystalization of new conceptions of the world and new possibilities for active intervention“ (Harvey 2001:118). Although my own arguing for the potential that the concept of zoning has is clearly aligned with such a position, I harbor strong doubts about possibilities for intervention and change. The powers that be are producing spaces and using them to their advantage with an unprecedented intensity and scope without needing to engage the theoretical ramifications of land, property and place. It is my opinion that how the knowledge the spatial turn has produced might be employed will not be decided by its a priori political positioning and its attendant commitments but by contextual and local factors amongst which is the freedom of choice of the individual dwelling in a particular place.

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