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Space Matters! Spatial Inequality in Future Sociology*

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Thirty years ago as a struggling student, I found cheap housing in a rundown apartment complex in old Greenbelt, Maryland. Cramped and shabby, our small apartment was nevertheless remarkably well-designed. Even more revealing was the design of the neighborhood in which it was located. The original Greenbelt had been a WPA project whose physical layout was designed to embody principles of community, cooperation, and egalitarianism in a "green" or park-like setting. It stood in stark contrast to the ever-expanding suburban sprawl that enveloped the surrounding areas. In those heady days of mobilization for new social movements, we were enthralled to discover a community plan that seemed to incorporate similar ideals deliberately in its architecture and design. About the same time, an unconventional sociology instructor reinforced this impromptu lesson on the importance of environmental design by claiming that he could construct living space guaranteed to break up any relationship. He further elaborated aspects of the design of the campus and surrounding areas that facilitated or impeded the demonstrations and organizing efforts that were an ongoing part of the landscape in that season of anti-war protests, women's liberation, and earth day mobilization. Space mattered!

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Three decades later, the notion that the natural and built environment, the design of space and place, shapes social relations remains peripheral to the sociology curriculum, reflecting its poorly specified place in sociological theory and research. Even less apparent then and now is the reciprocal idea that human agency shapes space and place; environments are socially constructed, often to embody the same principles and processes as other social institutions. Different settings create and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities, reinforce or undermine ideologies, and enable and promote some practices over others. Sociology, despite its deep stake in understanding spatiality, has been inconsistent in its efforts to analyze this component of social life, and has made little forward progress in systematically incorporating it into its central projects. The reasons can be found partly in the division of labor among the social sciences and partly in internal developments within sociology.

Here I first briefly specify the meanings of space and place and then examine the state of spatial analysis in sociology, particularly for the sociology of inequality. I discuss ways that spatiality permeates the study of power and inequalities, yet lacks explicit and systematic theoretical development or sustained empirical research. Finally, I consider how spatiality should be integrated into the sociology of the twenty-first century to create a robust spatialized sociology of inequality.

The Meaning of Space and Place

Space can be conceptualized in three ways: as *place*—the particular locale or setting; as *relational units* that organize ideas about places and implicitly or explicitly compare locations; and as *scale*, or the size of the units to be compared (Lobao 1996; McDowell 1999). These can be viewed as context, cause, or outcome for other social processes. From the smallest unit of the human body through multiple aggregate and collective examples such as household, community, neighborhood, city, region, state, nation, or global system, particular places provide a locale that may operate as a container and backdrop for social action, as a set of causal factors that shape social structure and process, and finally as an identifiable territorial manifestation of social relations and practices that define that particular setting.

Each setting may be expressed in units that imply comparisons with other units of similar or differing scales and that incorporate characteristics of that kind of locale. For example, locations can be defined and compared in terms of their population—size, distribution, density, social and demographic characteristics; types of economic activity; distance from other places; and physical, cultural, and political features. One or more of these may be delineated separately and specified for particular places, or they may be summarized and generalized in broad spatial concepts such as *rural* and *urban* or *developed* and *developing*, ideal types that have the appearance of "natural" constructs. In fact, they are the products of conceptual and operational decisions, encoding a multitude of comparisons that are measured through some combination of the above criteria. *Rural* and *urban*, for example, usually include population size and density, land use, and economic base. Once classified, locational units may be compared on a variety of social forms and processes.

Finally, places defined at different spatial scales may be stacked, overlapped, or nested, sometimes by design, as counties constitute states and states in turn partition nation—sometimes more haphazardly as overlapping and even competing jurisdictions that characterize local government and quasi-governmental agencies (e.g., school districts, utility districts, law enforcement jurisdictions). The articulation of units at different spatial scales, particularly the local and the global, has become one of the central problematics of contemporary social science (Lobao 1996; Lobao, Rulli, and Browne 1999).

Regardless of which dimension is examined, places (hence space) are "contested, fluid and uncertain . . . made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries . . . [that] are both social and spatial" (McDowell 1999: 4). The ability to control the timing and spacing of human activities is a key component of modernity (Friedland and Boden 1994: 28, after Giddens) and reflects the distribution of power and the control of resources. Relations of power, structures of inequality, and practices of domination and subordination are embedded in spatial design and relations. Thus spatial arrangements are both products and sources of other forms of inequality. They can be studied as the context for better scrutinized systems of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual privilege, as a formative factor in such systems, and as their outcomes. As such, they constitute part of the opportunity structure, shaping and shaped by its constituent parts and an obvious target for investigation for the sociology of systems of inequality.

The Place of Space in Sociology

History claims time as its domain, and geography theorizes space (Friedland and Boden 1994). Sociology, in its alternation between arrogance at being the "queen" of social sciences and confusion about its scientific status, has a checkered history relative to both of these analytic concepts. In its most positivist modes, and at particular periods in its historical development, its practitioners have slighted both the historical and spatial contexts of social structure and process and totally ignored the social construction of space and time. More recently, historical time has come into its own among sociologists. The rapid growth of historical sociology and sociological history, closer attention to periodization, and widespread use of methods and theories sensitive to historical variation by practitioners of both quantitative and qualitative methods have established temporal factors as central to the sociological enterprise. Space and place are still struggling to find their voice in sociology. With notable exceptions,[1] the task of directly theorizing space has been relegated mainly to geography.

The neglect of explicit spatial theory and research is a peculiar deficiency in a discipline whose early and central projects have been as much about spatial variation as about temporal change. Whether focused on grand theories of social evolution and revolution, ecology, modernization, development, and political economy or developing the data and methods for empirical study of micro and macro social processes and practices, sociology from its outset investigated and theorized differences between different types of places. Central oppositional concepts such as modern/pre- and postmodern, developed/developing, *gesellschaft/gemeinschaft*, urban/rural, core/periphery, and more recently, global/local attest to the interest in spatial variation and the meaning of place.

Similarly, virtually all the fundamental concepts identifying social institutions have an important spatial component. It is not possible to think about community, neighborhood, environment, household, work, school, state, or labor markets, to name a few, without at least implicitly assuming their spatial character. Households, for example, may be abstractions that describe sets of social relationships and networks of interactions, but they also have physical manifestations and boundaries that are important for understanding their meanings and practices. Communities commonly are assumed to have defined locations that create and limit individual and collective opportunities and outcomes. Liberation movements prosper in their discovery of the chinks in repressive structures—the free spaces—that permit organization and mobilization (Evans and Boyte 1986). Nation-states are defined by their control of territory and their ability to defend these boundaries.

Even aspatial concepts typically are described in spatial terms—social landscapes, class locations, segmented labor markets, embedded institutions, career ladders, status hierarchies, and cyberspace—metaphors that provide familiar spatial imagery to ground notions of how these operate. Gender is theorized and analyzed in terms of spatial segregation and differential access to public and private domains, social goods, and resources and has been enriched by spatial scrutiny that demonstrates ways that space contains, creates, and is constructed around gender relations (Gilman [1898]1996; McDowell 1999; Spain 1992). Labor markets and economies are localized, transforming abstract social relations into observable exchanges within defined boundaries (Lobao 1996; Killian and Tolbert 1993). Families are situated within domiciles and households of varying forms and structures, embedded in local labor markets (Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1993). Personal encounters are conditioned by whether they involve face-to-face interaction (Boden and Molotch 1994) and by whether they are conducted in "front" or "back regions" (Goffman 1959). Organizations and social structures are defined by the nature of ties within and across their boundaries (Tilly 1999). The body becomes a site for the exercise of power and status display (McDowell 1999) Even academic disciplines have borders that present opportunities and threats (*Contemporary Sociology* 1999).

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[1] Social theorists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu explicitly theorize time and space together. Other analysts draw from history and geography, theories of Foucault and Lefebvre and the work of geographers Harvey (1996), Massey (1984), Soja (1989), and others. See Friedland and Boden (1994) for a useful review and map of the issues and ideas.

Finally, entire subspecialties are predicated on spatial distinctions. Most notable are the explicitly spatially defined subspecialties of rural, urban, and community sociology, each with its own organizations, literatures, and scholarly traditions. But other areas also are noted for their attention to spatially defined processes. These include human ecology and evolution with their focus on the social organization of human environments, demography with its enumeration and documentation of the movement of human populations within and across political and geographic boundaries, various development paradigms that examine industrialization, restructuring, and state formation in different locales and regions, political economy and uneven development within nation-states, and the relatively new area of environmental sociology. Studies from these and related areas provide numerous empirical examples of spatial analyses. Thus, sociology can be faulted less for its failure to recognize spatiality or to study differences across space and place than for its failure to theorize space explicitly, to analyze it systematically, and to weave it into the fabric of other social processes. Nowhere is this clearer than in the study of inequality. As the discipline has advanced in its understanding of the sources and consequences of different stratification systems and factors, as the processes that construct gender, race, and class difference, privilege, domination, and subordination become increasingly well understood, and as the practices that shape everyday experience of these social facts are unveiled, spatial processes and variation take a back seat to other sources of inequality and other means of producing and reproducing these systems of power and privilege. Why do we routinely recognize that gender, race, class, and a variety of other "categorical" sources of inequality constitute material social relations and inequalities, but fail to give equal recognition to spatial categories. If anything, spatial categories and relations are more grounded, more material. In short, the problem of space is not its lack of relevance or interest for sociologists, nor its absence from classical theory or current exemplary research. Rather, the issue is to "mainstream" spatial concepts and approaches and to extend our boundaries to incorporate spatial processes as part of the fabric of social life and its construction.

Integrating Space and Place into a Sociology of Inequality

As sociology enters a new millennium, the imbalance in time and space will need to be reconsidered. Spatial relationships between different social systems and actors continue to sort themselves in an increasingly globalized economy, coexisting with growing spatial inequalities that mirror and reproduce better scrutinized structural inequalities. Future studies of inequalities must incorporate spatial sources and outcomes. I would like to suggest three ways that spatial concerns should be incorporated into studying inequalities: issues of scale and measurement; issues of comparative advantage and disadvantage; issues of meaning, control, and construction. These mirror the three dimensions of space described at the beginning of this essay, but organize them somewhat differently to emphasize fruitful avenues for future development.

Scale and Measurement. The appropriate spatial scale and the ways to measure it are enduring problems in current sociological analysis. Issues of scale include selection (and neglect) of the appropriate scale for analysis, segregation of empirical research at different scales in different research traditions and literatures, development of good measures, especially for smaller-scale units, and need to develop and elaborate multilevel or multiscale models.

There is a tendency to emphasize national, cross-national, and urban scales and to segregate work at other scales within specialty literatures. The most widely read and disseminated areas of research focus on national populations and processes. Research that employs national samples to study inequality processes and outcomes, such as status attainment, mobility, and earnings models, often ignores spatial effects completely or settles for crude and error-prone measures of regional or residential variation that serve as proxies for social and economic differences. For example, throwing dummy control variables into statistical models to indicate South–non-South region or metropolitan-nonmetropolitan residence to act as proxies for complex socioeconomic processes is as close as many studies come to incorporating spatiality. Even this gesture to space is often of dubious value, since the amount of measurement error introduced in this process may undermine the beneficial effect.

Studies at other spatial scales are segregated to a greater or lesser degree within subdiscipline and specialty literatures. There are journals for urban sociology, rural sociology, development sociology, community sociology, and environmental sociology. Although this pattern may be changing, they typically operate with surprisingly little dialogue or cross-fertilization. This is not a criticism of the existence or content of these research traditions and publications. Quite the contrary, these and similar sources often provide the only dependable outlets for research that examines social processes at non-national scales. Rather, it is their isolation from each other and from the journals and topics of "core" sociology that is called into question.

Their relative obscurity along with lower interest and priority for subnational and peripheral places masks the problems of measurement and data production that are frequently at issue for small-scale spatial concepts. Available measures are often the by-products of other political, economic, and measurement agendas. There is little pressure either to systematically produce data or to refine measures for marginalized places and groups who wield relatively little political power.

A related problem lies in the tendency to confuse, conflate, or ignore spatial processes at different scales. For example, poverty in both research and policy analysis is often assumed to be a national problem that is analyzed with an urban bias. National and urban poverty analyses are often conflated, while the real, severe, and frequently quite different problems of rural poverty are relegated to the back regions of social analysis and public policy or are ignored completely, even though rates of rural poverty equal or exceed urban figures (Rural Sociological Society Task Force 1993). This is especially ironic because poverty is one topic where spatial effects are given serious theoretical expression and empirical scrutiny at all spatial scales—in the rapidly growing literature on urban poverty, segregation, and neighborhood effects (Jagorksi 1997; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1996; Wright 1997) and in a rural tradition of labor market analysis, regional, and community studies of uneven development and inequality (Lyson and Falk 1993; Rural Sociological Society Task Force 1993).

Poverty analysis, while not unique, provides an exceptionally transparent example of the importance and power of spatial analysis, both negatively in the dangers of failing to examine variation by place and space and positively in the benefits gained from such investigation. Poverty is gendered, raced, and spaced. The processes that impoverish and disempower poor women in rural areas often differ from those in urban locales, as do the resources and options available to them (Tickamyer et al. 1993; Tickamyer 1995–96). It is not just that different contexts have different outcomes that require documentation, but spatial processes construct social relations through sets of contingencies that modify these processes. Thus causal factors implicated in poverty, such as labor force attachment, are themselves the outcomes of spatial processes that construct place variation (Brown and Lee 1999).

Finally, the nested character of social processes corresponds to the nested spatial domains of varying scale that they inhabit. For example, two key social structures for understanding inequality are households and labor markets. They each operate as both economic and spatial units and have mutual influences on each other's composition and practices (Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1993). They intersect at their margins, blurring distinctions between different forms of work: waged and nonwaged, formal and informal, productive and reproductive, and how these are gendered, raced, and spaced. While advances have been made in methods to analyze social processes that operate simultaneously at multiple spatial scales, they are as yet infrequently implemented. Future work needs to push ahead to investigate the ways socio-spatial processes are embedded in nested and overlapping institutions and spatial scales.

A sociology of inequality that incorporates issues of scale has both more local and more complex models of social-spatial processes. In other words, how do systems of inequality operate in different locales? What is the appropriate scale for studying a particular social form or practice? How do nesting and overlapping jurisdictions separately and mutually influence these processes? How does the articulation of spatial units reinforce or undermine relations of power, domination, and subordination, ranging from those located in households and communities to those in national and global systems? How do global processes affect local places? How does the local constrain or encourage globalization and its agents?

Comparative Advantage. The study of inequalities investigates sources of comparative advantage and disadvantage. Simple, single-factor models of status transmission and class privilege have given way to more nuanced accounts of the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age to form shifting and dynamic systems of domination and subordination in different institutional and organizational realms. Often lacking in these accounts is spatial context, both as setting and as yet another dynamic component of stratification.

Here the complexity of space is most apparent. Relational constructs of space such as *urban* and *rural*, however they are explicitly operationalized, typically provide the settings for comparisons across different types of locations. They are used to discover variation in the operations and interactions of social forms and relations such as gender norms and practices, race relations, and the acquisition and performance of sexual identities. Similarly, these locations provide the means for comparisons of social-spatial structures such as households and labor markets in different places. Such comparisons facilitate understanding of how these differences are hierarchically ordered and valued.

At the same time, relational settings can be understood as more than just containers for other social forms and practices; they are also configurations of social, political, demographic, and economic practices that provide people and places with varying degrees of power, opportunity, and advantage and that combine and intersect with other systems that construct privilege or deprivation. The more carefully and elaborately specified the processes that take place within the setting, the more nuanced the understanding of sources of comparative advantage and disadvantage. Thus, demonstrating simple rural-urban differences in labor market inequalities at both supply and demand sides has less explanatory power than elaborating differences in economic base, industrial mix, links to other markets, human capital factors, and population characteristics that constitute different places. Examining whether informal economic activity is more apparent in rural versus urban locations is important, but ultimately less informative than elaborating the conditions under which it takes place and the relations to the formal economy (Tickamyer and Wood 1998).

The important questions to ask are not just How do urban and rural, metro and nonmetro, developed and developing places compare and differ, but How do these differences develop? What is it about each type of place that influences opportunity and power structures? What are the unique configurations of the other social forms that constitute types of places and provide comparative advantage or disadvantage?

Meaning, Construction, and Control. Spatial relations have both symbolic and practical meanings whose construction and control are integral parts of systems of inequality. Places are defined by power relations that also define boundaries that "are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience" (McDowell 1999: 4). While the most commonly acknowledged and incorporated meaning for space in social research is as setting, backdrop, or context, the relationship between spatial and other social factors is, in fact, dynamic, with space both constituting social relations and also constituted by them. Space is continually constructed and reconstructed, most reflexively in urban planning and architectural design, quite deliberately in the territorial conquests of warring states or the political and economic incursions of colonizing political and economic powers, but also inexorably (if less intentionally) in complex multidimensional interactions whose spatial outcomes nevertheless reflect, reinforce, and recreate power structures and relations. Regional identities and cultures, such as Southern or Appalachian, often the center of heated academic debate over their meaning and existence, pass the W. I. Thomas test—they are believed to be real and are therefore real in their consequences—consequences that include structures of inequality. Crux events intertwine with their locations to attain symbolic meaning and both coercive and liberatory power: Chernobyl, Watergate, Stonewall, and Wounded Knee attain new meaning with powerful ramifications for social action.

Explicit theorizing of space as a social construction emerges from diverse theoretical and empirical traditions, ranging from human ecology and growth machine analyses (Logan and Molotch 1987) to critical and postmodern geographies that postulate a socio-spatial dialectic that constrains and shapes social and spatial relations and activity simultaneously and reciprocally (Soja 1989). The project has been particularly productive for feminist geography, whose objective "is to investigate, make visible and challenge the relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions, to uncover their mutual constitution and problematize their apparent naturalness" (McDowell 1999: 12). Multidisciplinary research has demonstrated how spatial arrangements condition the gender division of labor, access to resources and allocation of time and labor in public and private arenas ranging from occupational sex segregation and industrial location to household and urban geography (Hanson and Pratt 1995; Hayden 1980; Spain 1992). The example of gendered spatial divisions provides models for the ways to extend spatial analysis to other forms of stratification and inequalities.

The questions to be asked are Who controls the natural and built environments? Whose designs are adopted and naturalized? Whose meanings gain prevalence and whose benefits are maximized? What parties are in contention on these issues, and what are the stakes for these struggles as well as the outcomes? What processes empower or disenfranchise different groups in these processes. Finally, how do these differ across space and place for different locations and at different spatial scales?

An Agenda for Exploring Spatial Inequality

What would be the impact of more systematic incorporation of spatial factors into theory and research on inequalities? Pursuing the approaches described above would have implications for studies that vary in scale from the processes of globalization to impacts of devolution; from topics ranging from the rights of citizenship, ownership, and residence to control and representation of the body; and from the construction of personal space to global divisions of labor. Every area of social inequality can benefit from more scrutiny of spatial dimensions, but the main results would be the mainstreaming of currently peripheral areas of study, greater success in the ongoing project to elaborate the spatially contingent nature of social relations and practices, and more scrutiny of how spatial practices and environments are themselves structured through unequal social exchanges. An agenda for ways to bring spatial inequality into the study of social inequality would include:

- Increased study of spatial inequality *per se* at varying spatial scales and for all institutional realms (the economy, the state, the family, the media), and how these intersect with gender, race, class, sexuality, and other sources of social identity, groups, and hierarchy.
- Direct investigation of how spatial distinctions link to other differences and hierarchies, and how these in turn reveal spatial uses and inequalities and structure differential access to space and place.
- Greater scrutiny of peripheral, poor, remote, and exploited places at multiple scales, both separately and in their relationships and linkages to more central and global locations at similar and larger spatial scales. In other words, scrutiny of both the least and most powerful places and the connections between them.
- Better measurement and collection of data for peripheral locations at marginal scales, especially as they intersect with social processes that are inherently spatial such as households and labor markets. Rural places, less developed countries, and other marginal locations suffer from inadequate data sources and collection efforts.
- Specification of appropriate units and scales for analyzing specific social practices and forms: What units of analysis should be used to investigate particular forms of inequality? How are those units constructed and measured? What are the limits of using different units and measures of space and place?
- Direct investigation of the spatial properties of constructs that are normally viewed as aspatial or transcending space. The effort to spatialize labor markets, household, and gender should be extended to other social constructs.
- Movement beyond binary spatial distinctions to reformulate constructs such as rural and urban, developed and developing, public and private into social and spatial continua with variable and permeable boundaries defined by careful delineation of their properties and their relations with other social forms.

Conclusion

In a more crowded and connected world, control of space and place will become more contested and thus more obviously the source and measure of struggles for power and resources. As new technologies continue to shrink distance and the barriers of physical space, easily linking the most peripheral to the most central locations, new meanings of space emerge, and new power struggles for its control. The potential for contact and networks of social interaction previously unknown and unlikely increases while simultaneously eliminating the need for direct physical encounter. The meaning of space becomes more problematic and more sharply etched in struggles for control of both physical and metaphysical space. As communication and information technologies provide the means to transcend space, they will put a premium on control and access to real and virtual place and space. A sociology of inequality must direct its scrutiny to these struggles for space and the spatial dimensions of other social hierarchies.

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Analyzing Social Inequality in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization and Modernity Restructure Inequality

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Introduction

What are the key sociological ideas on social inequality that we should bring forward into the twenty-first century, and what are the new ideas, theories, research topics that should be developed? Social inequality will enter the twenty-first century in new forms, but many of these will recapitulate themes that have been traditional to sociology for longer than the last century.

The key to understanding the twenty-first century is the analysis of two processes: globalization and modernization. Globalization is led by new information and communication technologies that are reshaping not only financial and capital markets but political and cultural processes. Globalization is fundamentally restructuring social institutions and their interrelationship, with consequences for the degree and forms of social inequality. Modernization is still ongoing, as the gender regime is slowly transformed from a domestic to public form and women enter the public sphere of employment and the state. While modernization is often considered the completion of a transition from traditional to industrial society in the South of the globe, here I mean the modernization of gender relations around the developed world, as women emerge into more public arenas. Globalization and modernity should not be conflated, but rather seen as separate processes, with combined and uneven effects. I explore these processes in relation to new forms of working, the World Wide Web, and the restructuring of welfare and of politics.

Global Restructuring

In the twenty-first century, as in the past, social inequality will be globally structured, but the nature of the connections will be different, more intense, the linkages more speedy, the significance of physical distance less important. The global hierarchy itself will be restructuring as a result of new economic, political, and cultural relations. The information age will mature and new computer-based technologies will become more powerful, facilitating even faster links. This global restructuring will be key to new forms of social inequality in ways we have yet to conceptualize.

We will need to develop new concepts to capture the new spatial and temporal forms of restructuring of inequalities. Current concepts, such as "space-time compression" (Harvey 1989) or "glocalisation" (Robertson 1992), will become outdated because of new types of space/time restructuring, and need to be replaced.

The restructuring of space and time will have different implications for different social groups. Concepts of diaspora (Cohen 1997) and hybridity (Gilroy 1993) will become increasingly relevant in a globalizing world. We will investigate whether ethnic diaspora, which straddle nation-states, may be empowered by their global linkages, facilitating trading and economic networks previously stymied by nationalist concerns, or whether they are victimized by a backlash from the majority members of their countries who fear their success. We will debate the nature of new forms of hybridity, of the creative ways in which identities emerge and are re-formed, split, merged, and changed.

Modernization of Gender Regime

Taking place simultaneously with globalization is the modernization of gender regimes. Gender relations are being transformed with women's entry into the public spheres of employment and of the state, with a consequent reduction in their dependence on individual husbands or fathers. The transition in the form of gender regimes from domestic to public started in some Western countries in the nineteenth century and will continue into the twenty-first. For some groups of women the transition reduces inequality, as for some young educated women

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