

The Complexities of Place

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If the twentieth century was, as Foucault claimed in the 1967 lecture 'Of Other Spaces', the century of space, by the end of that century, and into the beginning of the next, it is neither space nor time alone, but rather place that has increasingly come to prominence. Of course, the thematisation of space is often been assumed itself to encompass the concept of place, and on this basis it might be thought that the emphasis on place is merely a continuation, perhaps even an intensification, of the turn toward spatiality. Place and space certainly stand in an intimate and important relation to one another (as also do place and time), but place is nevertheless a distinct concept, even though the nature of its distinctness has often been ignored or overlooked. Place is, moreover, itself a much contested notion. An emphasis on place is often assumed to go with a reactionary and conservative politics, and yet place also appears as a concept that motivates many more radical political movements, especially those directed towards indigenous issues and concerns.

The contested character of place can be clearly discerned in the way in the divergent ways in which place is often understood and the different discourses in which it emerges. Within environmental discourse, it sometimes seems as if what are most properly places are those locales that have a character that is somehow intrinsic to them as *natural* places - the wilderness is thus paradigmatic of place on such an account. Equally, within some geographic and anthropological discussions, the most highly urbanised places, especially those characteristic places of modern urban landscapes such as the mall and the service station, are seen as exemplary *non-places*. Of course, the presuppositions that underpin these different, but in some ways oddly overlapping, approaches to the concept of place are very different, although in neither case is the concept of place that might be at issue generally made explicit.

So what is place? It is important both to distinguish place from space, as well as from time, and to acknowledge their connectedness. I take the essential characteristic of place to consist in a certain 'bounded openness', that is, places have an expansiveness to them such that things can appear and events take place within them, and yet they are also bounded, and so distinct from other places (although the boundedness of a place is never determinate).¹ The openness of place means that places always open up into spaces, and so place is that within which even space itself appears. Place, moreover, always has a dynamic element to it – place is that wherein things happen, in which things 'take place' – and so while place is distinct from time as well as from space, it also stands in an essential relation to the temporal.²

Space and time aside, however, 'place' is also an ambiguous term in its own right. This ambiguity is particularly well-captured in Gertrude Stein's famous comment about Oakland – 'there is no there there'.³ Stein's use of 'there' seems to imply at least two, if not three, senses of place. The first, evident in the initial 'there is', is the sense in which something is or is not there (in this case, is not) – the sense in which Aristotle says that 'to be is to be somewhere',⁴ and that is evident not only in the English 'there is', but also in the French 'il y a', as well as in the compound verb 'da-sein' used in German to mean being present. In this sense place refers us to the essentially singular character of existence – to be is always to be *here, now, in this* (or that) place. The second sense that Stein draws upon, given in the 'no there', is the sense in which place refers us to some particular site or locale that has a special significance. In Stein's case, on one reading, the Oakland she revisited in later life was no longer the Oakland she had grown up in – the family home and neighbourhood had lost the character she remembered – another reading takes the comment to be a more general dismissal of Oakland as lacking any kind of distinctive character at all. The third sense of place that Stein employs, evident in the final 'there', is that of simple location – there is no 'there' in *that* place, namely, Oakland, as distinct from other places. This last sense might easily be conflated with the first – if one supposes, that is, that to say 'there is'

something is merely to assert that something 'is there'. Yet strictly speaking the two senses are distinct – as the fact *that* something is must be treated as distinct from *where* something is – even though for something to be is, as Aristotle claims, always for it to be *somewhere*.⁵

While it may be distinct, it is nevertheless also the case that this third sense of place is often given priority over both the first and the second. Indeed, as Ed Casey has shown, the increasing tendency, particularly over the last 500 years or so of European history, has been to think of place in terms that reduce it to mere location or position within an extended space – place becomes, as Ed Casey puts it, “a mere ‘modification’ of space... a modification that aptly can be called ‘site’ [sic], that is, levelled-down, monotonous *space for* building or other human enterprises...reduced to locations between which movements of physical bodies occur”.⁶ On this way of thinking, place turns out to be a highly limited or else somewhat arbitrary or constructed notion – identical either with the position of a body in space or else a conventionally defined position (perhaps a mere point) or area of the sort that can be identified using physical markers in a space or coordinates imposed onto that space (and which thereby allows representation in the form of a map).

For the most part, the sense or conception of place that seems to me to have become increasingly important in contemporary discussions has been the sense of place associated with the second of the three senses I have distinguished – with the idea of place as *significant locale*. When Gertrude Stein claims that Oakland has no 'there', what she surely means is that Oakland neither has any special character of its own, nor can she identify herself in relation to that place or feel any sense of belonging to it (even if, perhaps, she once did). Moreover, one might similarly suppose that it is this same sense of 'place' that is also at issue in both the idea of place that underpins the emphasis on place as wilderness and on the idea of place that underlies the idea of certain urban places as 'non-places'. Wild or natural places are seen precisely those locales that have a special character or identity of their own, while those place such as the mall or the service station are seen

as lacking any such special character – as being places whose identity is purely that of the commodity, of the homogenised ‘site’.

The problem with taking this latter sense of ‘place’ – place as significant locale – as the basis for thinking further about the nature of place as it relates to contemporary discussions of place is that it does not actually take us very far at all, and certainly provides little in the way of analytical potential. Clearly the sense of ‘place’ that is at issue in the idea of place as ‘significant locale’ needs to be further unpacked – we need to understand better just what the idea of ‘significant locale’ involves. In fact, the conceptual unpacking that is required here turns out to refer us back to the other two senses of ‘place’ that we have already identified – to place as ‘existential ground’ and place as ‘simple location’. The question, then, is to explore further just what is involved in these two other senses of place, and how they relate to ‘place’ as significant locale.

The two senses of ‘place’ that are now at issue are those that treat ‘place’ in terms of what I have termed ‘existential ground’ and ‘simple location’. As I have already noted, it is the second of these, place as simple location, that tends to take priority in much thinking about place – so much so, in fact, that the first sense, place as existential ground, may not even be recognised, and is almost certain to appear as obscure and unfamiliar.

To see the way in which place as simple location is given priority here, one need only reflect on the pervasive tendency to take place as to a greater or lesser extent derivative of space – even in those cases where place is also understood in terms of ‘significant locale’. In her introduction to a volume of essays significantly titled ‘Constructing Place: Mind and Matter’, Sarah Menin writes:

Taking up the challenge laid down by Amos Rapaport’s argument that ‘place’ has become a buzz word – being ‘space’ plus ‘something’, where the something is never completely explained – this collection of essays seeks to explicate this ‘something’, which may be both mental and, through detailed examples from a variety of contexts, material, or may, indeed, be only mental with little material manifestation. The contrary (a material context with little

mental meaning) is more unlikely, since we invest material phenomena with meaning by engaging with them, and there can be little, if any, material that has no meaning.⁷

As Menin presents matters, 'place' would seem to be 'space' plus 'meaning', while 'meaning' is, so it would appear, something brought to space by 'us' ('we invest material phenomena with meaning by engaging with them'). As a result, and in spite of Menin's allusion to a something 'material' as also having a possible role here (an allusion which remains somewhat obscure), place emerges as a form of 'meaningful space', in which meaning is brought to that space through the conjunction of space with 'mind' or 'the mental'.

While talk of 'mind' in this context is less common, the basic idea of place as meaningful or perhaps as 'humanised' *space* is widespread. Yi Fu Tuan, in his pioneering work, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, presents place in much this way, commenting at one point that "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."⁸ Understood as a conjunction of the spatial with the meaningful or the human, place is treated as essentially composed or 'constructed' out of two more basic and pre-existing components - *space* and *meaning* (or the human); it arises through the endowing of simple locations, that is, regions or positions in physical space, with meaning through the activities of human beings. In this way the account gives priority to place *as simple location*, and so also to space, over the concept of place *as significant locale*, since the latter is partially composed out of and decomposable into the former. The significance that is part of place as significant locale, is just a matter of the humanly derived significance that attaches to certain simple locations - in Stein's terms, for there to be no 'there' there would thus be for there to be no humanly derived meaning that attaches to the particular spatial location in question.

It is important to note that the idea of space on which this understanding of place draws, if often only implicitly, is the idea of a more or less homogenous extendedness in which particular locations can be specified.

As the space itself has no characteristics that are specific to particular locations within it, so the locations are more or less arbitrary portions of, or positions in, that space in which one location is not intrinsically different from any other. This particular way of understanding space is one that has been dominant, at least in European thinking, since the time of the scientific revolution, although it has its origins in much earlier conceptions.⁹ It is also a way of understanding space that already tends to bring with it a sharp dichotomy between the realm of the spatial, identified with the realm of the purely physical and even the 'natural', and the realm of meaning, of the human or of the 'mind'. Moreover, although it gives a priority to space over place – place is, one might say, a variety of space – space does not, on this account, carry any meaning or significance of its own. One consequence of this is that what matters in terms of place as significant locale is not the simple location to which meaning or human significance is attached, but the meaning or significance as such. Place, understood as simple location, is, strictly speaking, *meaningless*, just as pure physical space is also devoid of meaning in the absence of human engagement with it. Indeed, Sarah Menin's claim, contained in the quotation above, that "[w]e invest material phenomena with meaning by engaging with them", would seem to carry much the same implication, namely, that in the absence of engagement, there can be no investing of meaning.¹⁰

That place as such has a denuded role here may seem an odd conclusion to draw, but it is one that follows inevitably from the construal of place in terms of simple location. That construal already separates place *as location* from place *as sense or meaning*. The result of this way of understanding place, and the sense of place, is an odd form of displacement. If the sense of place is given wholly in the meaning or sense that attaches to a location, what will be important is not the location as such, but rather the shapes of practice and ritual, the structures of story and song, the content of idea and concept, that happen to be instantiated in concrete form in and around that location, but which could also be instantiated elsewhere. The *significance* of a place can

thus be viewed as actually independent of, and even separable from, any particular place, any particular *location*, to which it may attach. So it seems that, understood in this way, place as significant locale has very little to do with place at all.

The idea that the significance of place is solely a product of human activity connects directly with another common way of thinking about place – probably the dominant way of thinking about place within contemporary discussions, namely, place as socially *constructed*. David Harvey asserts, for instance, that “Place, in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct... The only interesting question that can then be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?”¹¹ Patricia L. Price, whose book *Dry Places: Landscapes of Exclusion and Belonging*, clearly belongs to the large body of contemporary place-oriented literature and can be seen as exemplary of that literature, is equally explicit in asserting a constructionist view of place:

I do indeed assert that place is thoroughly socially constructed, that place qua place does not exist. Rather narratives about people’s places in places continuously materialize the entity we call place. In its materializations, however, there are conflicts, silences, exclusions. Tales are retold and their meanings wobble and shift over time. Multiple claims are made. Some stories are deemed heretical. The resulting dislocations, discontinuities, and disjunctures work to continually destabilize that which appears to be stable: a unitary, univocal place.¹²

Price refers to the work of Judith Butler in explicating her argument here – Butler’s work (itself focussed not on place but on gender) provides a particularly prominent and influential version of the constructionist position (though a version that some would argue has been widely misconstrued) – but while Price may explicate her position somewhat differently from Harvey, the general form of her constructionism is very similar. For both Price and Harvey, place is a purely constructed phenomenon, and Price’s rejection of the idea that there is any “place qua place” can be seen as another way of putting Harvey’s point that the only interesting question about place concerns the processes by which it is constructed. Of course, this seems to suggest, once

again, that on this construal, place is actually to be understood as a conjunction of mere location with something else, in this case, with social process, and what matters is the social process that happens to be worked out in every case through specific locations – as it must if such processes are to be realised at all.

The subjectivist and constructionist construal of place that is at work is also significant when it comes to issues concerning the ethical or political character of place – something I alluded to at the beginning of this talk. Many writers regard place as an inherently problematic concept in virtue of its supposed association with conservative and reactionary politics. This is not only taken to be exemplified by the supposed association between fascist and especially Nazi politics and notions of place-based identity and belonging, but also by some forms of environmental thinking. This takes on a particularly clear form in the Levinasian claim that the idea of a human connection to place is inherently oppressive, exclusionary and given over to violence. If place is viewed as itself a salient and significant concept, then it is more difficult to understand how place could be construed as ethically or politically problematic. Part of the difficulty would consist simply in the problem of making sense of a shift away from place – the need for such a shift is, arguably, one of the implications that might be thought to follow from the claim that place is ethically problematic. But it would also create problems in explaining how to make sense of the supposedly ethically deleterious effect of place. Construing place as already socially or discursively constructed is already to position place within a framework of rhetorical and discursive effects – it is, one might say, already to position it in such a way such that it immediately has an ethical or political potential, whether positive or negative, and is amenable to ethical and political evaluation.

The sense of place that is at issue in this latter idea is the sense contained in the first ‘there’ that appears in Gertude Stein’s comment on Oakland – the ‘there’ of ‘there is’. This is a sense of place that is, as I indicated earlier, related to the sense of place as simple location, but is also distinct from

it, and essentially refers us to the way in which to be is always to be in some place – place is the ground on which our existence is based, and in and through which it is articulated. We are who and what we are through our relatedness to what exists around us, but such relatedness is itself inseparable from the specificity of our own locatedness, from the place, and places, in which we live. Our existence is, then, fundamentally a matter of our being ‘in’ place, our being ‘there’. This sense of place is one that treats place, not as a form of simple location that can be separated from what is attached to it, but as the very framework of relatedness that establishes certain entities, whether persons or things, not merely as having a certain character, but also as being ‘in’ a place – as being there such that one can indeed say ‘there is..’.

Although it may not immediately be evident, this sense of place also carries with it a conception of place as itself essentially relational, since it does not carry any connotation of place as some sort of ‘thing’, but rather as more akin to the framework within which things appear. Elsewhere I have illustrated this point by reference to the character of places as themselves constituted ‘topographically’ through their relation to other places, but this same ‘topography’ obtains within places as well as between them.¹³ Place can thus be understood as a ‘matrix’, not only in the original sense that it is that out of which things come to appearance¹⁴ – things appear only inasmuch as they have a place – but also in the more commonly understood sense of a structure of interconnection – things only appear inasmuch as they stand in relation to other things.

The sense of place that is involved with place as existential ground is tied to notions of concreteness and singularity. To have this sense of place is to have a sense of the uniqueness of this place – of its difference from other places even if that difference cannot be completely elucidated – and to have a sense of one’s own being in this place. Such a sense of place is undoubtedly given content through the particular human meanings that may attach to any particular location, and yet is not a matter just of that meaningful content alone. Instead, the sense of place is a sense of the complexity of relation that is

evident within that place, and by means of which the place, as well as what appears within it, is itself constituted. Since this sense of place gives priority to relation, and since there is no limit to the relations that open up within, and are opened up by, any specific place (this is a characteristic of relationality as such), so the sense of place that is operative here is not one that can ever be completely captured or determinately specified. As a result, the idea that one could recreate such a place or the sense of place that belongs to it, in virtual terms is already ruled out from the start – such an idea involves a misunderstanding of the nature of place as such.

The sense of place as existential ground can be seen as underpinning the ideas both of place as significant locale and place as simple location. For places as simple locations to appear, there already has to be a framework of relations that opens up to allow such appearance. Place as simple location is itself based in place as existential ground. The same point also holds, of course, for place as significant locale, but here we can say something more than just this. Understanding the grounding role of place enables us to recognise that one sense of place as significant locale is just the sense in which any and every place, just in virtue of being the place in which our own mode of being in the world is articulated, must always have a sense of place that belongs to it, must always be counted as a significant locale in its own right. This is so even though we may also single out specific places as having some special significance over and above this existential significance. Moreover, when we do look to places as having some such additional significance, then it can only be a significance that is itself articulated through the complex relatedness of the place, and so a special significance that does indeed pertain to the place as such, and not merely to some separable meaning that attaches to that place.

Notes and references

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- ¹ For a more detailed discussion of this way of understanding place, see *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. pp.157-74
- ² See *Place and Experience*, pp.159-63.
- ³ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*, (New York: Random House, 1937, p. 289): "She took us to see her granddaughter who was teaching in the Dominican convent in San Raphael, we went across the bay on a ferry, that had not changed but Goat Island might just as well not have been there, anyway what was the use of my having come from Oakland it was not natural to have come from there yes write about it if I like or anything if I like but not there, there is no there there."
- ⁴ Aristotle, *Physics* IV, 208a30
- ⁵ One might object that there are some possible exceptions to this within the history of ideas – for instance, God, universals – but even leaving aside other complications, it is not so obvious that such concepts necessarily entail some 'unplaced' mode of existence, rather than a different mode of existence, and so also of placedness.
- ⁶ See Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.x. Note that Casey's very precise use of the word 'site' in this passage is much narrower and more specific than that which I used above in talking of Gertrude Stein's Oakland, or than that which I use below.
- ⁷ Sarah Menin, 'Introduction', *Constructing Place: Mind and Matter* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.1; the embedded reference is to Amos Rapoport, 'A critical look at the concept "place"', in R.P.B.Singh (ed.), *The Spirit and Power of Place, Human Environment and Sacrality* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University Press, 1994), pp.31-45.
- ⁸ Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1977), p.6. Tuan's work is enormously important as a milestone in the theorisation of place as a *sui generis* concept, and is foundational to contemporary humanistic geography, and yet, although Tuan nowhere presents matters in quite the stark fashion that Menin does, still he seems to rely on what I tend to view as a 'subjectivised' conception of place that actually makes place secondary to space. See my comments on Tuan in *Place and Experience*, p.30, n33.
- ⁹ See Casey, *The Fate of Place*, esp. pp.79-161, and also 'Smooth Spaces and Rough-Edged Places: The Hidden History of Place', *Review of Metaphysics* 51 (1997), 267-96.
- ¹⁰ Menin adds the remark that "there can be little, if any, material that has no meaning", and if this is to be made consistent, then it would seem that it has to be understood along the lines that there can be little, if any, material with which there cannot be some form of engagement.
- ¹¹ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.293-294
- ¹² Patricia L. Price, *Dry Places: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.4. It is somewhat surprising to find Price citing Edward Casey's work as a supporting source for her claim that "place qua place does not exist". Casey's own emphasis is certainly on our experience of place (as befits his phenomenological orientation), but that does not seem to me to justify reading Casey as committed to denying the reality of place (which is how Price seems to interpret him). Indeed, a large part of Casey's work can be seen as arguing precisely for the reality of place even though he remains uneasy about any structural analysis of place (see, for instance, the exchange between Casey and me in *Philosophy and Geography* – it is worth noting the hesitations Casey expresses, not only about my talk of 'structure', but also about my use of concepts of narrativity – the subjectivism that seems to be a feature of Price's account is something that Casey clearly rejects).
- ¹³ See *Place and Experience*, p.39-41; see also Heidegger's *Topology*, pp.33-35.
- ¹⁴ The term originally refers, of course, to the womb, having the same Latin root as 'maternal' and 'maternity'.