You are Here(s):
The Place of Place, Today

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Abstract

The globalisation process invites us to freshly rethink the way the humans inhabits the surface of Earth. We already know for sure that by and large, globalisation changes the role of existing places but does not destroy them; II from the very first age of humanity onward, dwelling means not only staying but also moving; III a place can have different sizes, from local to global; IV our space is, first of all, a combination of networks, and V as a mobile reality, human beings are not reducible to a particular scale. In this context, we can take advantage in using the term ‘inhabiting’ if we are able to revisit it after Heidegger. From the metaphysical idea of ‘condition’, we can integrate the idea of inhabiting inside the general approach of human history, as a dimension of social becoming. Inhabiting can also be addressed as a societal horizon, which helps us to think together actors, objects, and environments.

Keywords: Space, Place, Scale, Metrics, Inhabiting, Network, Territory, Co-presence, Mobility, Tele-communication, Actor, Object, Environment
The concept of space has recently been marked by at least two pervasive representations. The first one is about the supposed opposition of place with the notion of space. In many Anglophone texts, ‘place’ was assigned the role of expressing permanent, ‘cultural’ identity while ‘space’ was loaded with connotations of blind, inhumane flows, bound to create ‘non-places’ (Augé, 1995). The second confusion is to be found quite at the opposite corner, according to ‘place’ a meaning as weak as ‘spot’. In this view, a place would be reduced to a location, in contrast with more richly dotted in substance ‘territories’ or ‘countries’.

In this text, I will plead for an approach of place which steps aside from both conceptions. Of course, when we define a term, we can take advantage of a certain arbitrary: words mean what we decide they mean. However, semantic choices are rarely meaningless in themselves. Placing place in our vocabulary is, necessarily giving a role to fixed and limited spatial situations in a context of increasing mobility and emerging globality. Defining place is not only an abstract exercise, and something else than a consistent glossary is at stake here. That is why, in spite of the highly theoretical nature of this debate, I chose to begin with a rather empirical ‘state of the space’, and, afterwards only, to enter the proper realm of concepts. No worse mistake than getting the present wrong.
I. Space and Spatialities in a Globalised World

The globalisation process invites us to freshly rethink the way the humans inhabit the surface of Earth. We already know for sure that:

1. By and large, globalisation changes the role of existing places but does not destroy them (Lévy, 2008).

Is the World ‘flat’ as announced by Thomas Friedmann (2005) in his best-selling book? It depends on what we mean by this. Recently, World 3.0, proposed by Pankaj Ghemawat (2011), noticed that the most part of any type of exchanges remains local and that globalisation is everything but the end of the existing places. Actually, the interconnection of places creates a competition between them in contrast with the previous situation, where cities or countries were, most of time, encapsulated in small, separated bubbles. A system of places has emerged, in which none of them can survive without connections with the others. Thanks to these links, places can build up a long-range attractiveness and influence the World as well as the World influences them. Hence the concept of ‘global city’: this notion makes sense when a city both exchanges much with other places on Earth, and ‘exports’ toward the rest of the World more than it ‘imports’ from it. This basic network of metropolises can be considered as fundamental as the territorial paving made up by states. This global network concentrates a significant part of
both productive and creative configuration: today, things happen there (figure 1).

![Figure 1. Productivity in Large Cities and Territories.](source)

However, beyond the primacy of large cities, globalisation makes possible that many locations can play their part, too, on the dual condition that they are accessible and they are able to produce something unique. This is clearly the case for tourism, the ‘industry of elsewhere’, for which virtually no place can be excluded of the market. As a result, rather than the subtraction of pre-existing realities, globalisation can be seen as the addition of a new, top tier that influences and is influenced by the others.

2. From the very first age of humanity onward, inhabiting means not only staying but also moving.

From its initial habitats in East Africa, *Homo Sapiens* has
slowly migrated through the rest of the continent, then to Eurasia and America, finally reaching the most flung-away Pacific islands a thousand years ago (figure 2).

![Figure 2. Homo Sapiens’s Migrations from –170,000 to –7,000.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_migration)

The composition of this set of reached, occupied, and eventually inhabited places has of course changed, but in a largely continuous process since the beginning of human presence. Some locations have disappeared, others, appeared. Some populations have been destroyed by human actions while fresh, blank areas have been colonised. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there is a significant link that relates us to our remote ancestors through places. The memory of locations
(toponyms) expresses this link, even when it takes the form of a name change, like in many Chinese-influenced areas in Asia. In short, from the very first ages of humanity, at the times when languages are supposed to be invented, human mobility has created a solid base for the current habitats. This heritage is the major potential resource for tourism. Thus the hunters-gatherers of humanity’s debuts give a hand to one of the most soaring sector of the contemporary economy. In short, our ancestors have created a set of places that is one of our present-day ecumene, a fundamental public good of humanity.

3. A place can have different sizes, from local to global.

Places matter, but what is a place? A place is a particular space where distance can be viewed as non-relevant. A place can be the location of my body, it can be much larger, if I can use tools to compensate and cancel the effects of distance. A city is designed to set up an environment in which we can evolve as if we were in a zero-dimension place, on a dot. Ubiquitous realities like ethics or law can work only if there is no difference between places regarding their relevance and their implementability. Depending from the capacity and the intentionality to overcome distance, small spaces, like an apartment, are managed as an area (a set of distinct, differentiated places) while large spaces, like the World, may become a place. When the scale of places becomes relative, the relation to place changes. The ‘vertical’ complexity of places, is actually the crucial criterion. The concept
of place is to be related to the spatial dimension of social interaction, not to the idea of a small, stable, ‘rooted’, and secluded environment, as it has been sometimes considered.

4. Our space is, first of all, a combination of networks.

Contemporary spatial sciences commonly distinguish territories from networks. The table below show that the traditional ‘country’ is only one of the possible spatial layouts. Moreover, the territory/network duality is not symmetrical. Territories are abstractions, sometimes partially achieved projects, as networks are the ordinary metric of inhabited spaces. By postulating continuity and contiguity, territories suppose a space encompassing infinity of points. In its uncluttered version, the territorial metric respects the principles of the Euclidean geometry, namely the ‘triangle inequality’, which is definitely not the rule in a real world whose proximities depend upon a multiple-speed system (figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metrics of Limits</th>
<th>Inner Metrics</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Topographical:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Territory</td>
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<td>Topological:</td>
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<td><em>Linguistic, cultural</em></td>
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<td><strong>Rhizome</strong></td>
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<td><em>Relational space of an individual</em></td>
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<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
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<td><em>Rural area; state</em></td>
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<td><strong>Grid</strong></td>
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<td><em>TV network</em></td>
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Figure 3. Metrics.
In spite of the overwhelming presence of networks, we have been trained to look at any space through the lens of territory. This is particularly true for geopoliticians who want territorial partners (that is: enemies), desperately seek acceptable ones, and, if they do not find them, make them up. Thus, from 2001 to 2008, George W. Bush has addressed and defined Al Qaeda as an attackable territory, although the terrorist group's spatial rationale is clearly a complex articulation of different networks. After Afghanistan, where the Bin Laden's headquarters were located in 2001, he opted for Iraq, because it was a true ‘country’ and so did he loose his grip on reality.

5. As a mobile reality, human beings are not reducible to a particular scale.

An apparently simple approach consists in identifying the individual as the smallest level in the scalar hierarchy of spaces. The World would be the largest scale and the human body the tiniest. However this list is not homogeneous, since it mixes spaces that are fixed and ‘riveted to the ground’ (as Friedrich Ratzel said), as individuals are mobile, and moreover intentionally mobile social realities.

As a result, scales of the individual are variable, along history, but inside a given society, too. When we have studied individual ‘neighbourhoods’ we have noticed that scale is a flexible parameter, probably more than the number of significant places.
in an individual daily life. This is partially caused by the diversity of metrics: in eight hours, you can cross an ocean by plane, but you can also cross two or three countries by high-speed train or even walk twenty kilometres in a mountain trail (figure 4).

Figure 4. Individual Neighbourhoods
If we try to visualise permanent spaces from superposition of individual mobility (figure 5), we have to admit that we can obtain them only by excluding medium and long-range journeys carried out by dwellers. So doing, we overestimate the importance their residence, the place where they use mostly to sleep, forgetting that they are ‘polytopical’: they inhabit several places. A local space (and a space in general) can then be defined more modestly as the intersection of human spatialities of a certain type on a given spatial extension. Nobody, except fierce, insane dictators, can wall individual spatialities inside a particular scale.

Figure 5. Local space, as a selective constellation of individual spatialities.
In this context, it can be useful to go back to the basics. Social interaction requires contact between social realities, namely humans. Distance is, then, a problem for societies. For thousands of years, they have set up three, and only three, main families of responses to this issue (figure 6): co-presence (everything in the same spot to generate permanent virtual contacts) mobility (displacement of matter to create a contact), tele-communication (matter-free displacement of information). These techniques interact both by competition (each one is an alternative for the others) and by cooperation (each one is useful for the others). A place is the environment that maximises co-presence, and instruments mobility and tele-communication to achieve this project. In a city, mobility and tele-communication can help to create spaces where distance does not make a difference. This coopetition explains why the three modalities of distance management can thrive together. Today, there are 4 billion urbanites, 1 billion international tourists, 5 billion cell phone users, and all indicators suggest that the progression slope of the three families should be similar in the next decades.

Figure 6. Managing Distance: Three Modalities.
As the expression of a substantial and relatively stable co-presence, places take advantage of this evolution. The hypothesis of a place-zapping, like channel-zapping with television, or of a generalised place-flight, like the North-American urban flight (1890-1990), has not been confirmed by recent tendencies. On the contrary, strong places are getting stronger and new spots are becoming significant places. This occurs on the condition that these places take on the new picture: the competition does not concern other places only but others ways of managing distance, too. Places as stakeholders can succeed if they properly do their ‘job’ as places. If they don’t, like for instance single-activity industrial cities or touristic resorts, they run a risk of loosing their comparative advantage.

II. Inhabiting, a Horizon for Humanity

After this short analysis of the present-day ensemble of spaces and spatialities, time has come to discuss philosophies of space and specially Heidegger’s conception of nearness. Beyond the criticism, we can and propose a larger, more open repertoire for human spatiality.

Inhabiting (German: Wohnen, French: habiter, Korean: 거주하다[geojuhada]) has been presented in Heidegger works (Sein und Zeit, 1927 [Being and Time, 1962]) as a metaphysical ‘condition’ of the being-in-the-world. His first major contribution
was to move the idea of dwelling from private housing to space in general. He does so by using two verses from the poet Friedrich Hölderlin to establish his field (Heidegger, 1951): ‘Full of merit, yet poetically man/Dwell on this earth’ (‘Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet/Der Mensch auf dieser Erde…’). Fully using the etymological resource of the German language for which ‘existing’ (dasein) also means ‘being here’, Heidegger gives space a central place in his philosophy. ‘Que faisons-nous avec l’espace? Nous l’habitons et c’est justement pour cela qu’il nous habite.’ (‘What do we do with space? We inhabit it and it is precisely for this reason that it inhabits us’, did Michel Lussault and myself wrote (2003).

However, this emphasis on space is strongly ‘coloured’, in Heidegger’s thought, by a hierarchy between rootedness (Bodenständigkeit) in a homeland (Heimat) little affected by human agency, and a ‘homelessness’ characterised by an a submission to ‘technique’. When he wrote: ‘Im Dasein liegt eine wesenhafte Tendenz auf Nähe’ (‘In dasein there lies an essential tendency towards closeness’, Being and Time, p. 140), he wants to draw a dividing line between the space as connected to the being, that is the spatiality that makes possible a contact with the metaphysical entities upon which humanities depends (Earth, Sky, and Gods), and the opposite situation, where mobility and historical changes create a perpetual turbulence that makes this dialogue impossible.

Here lies the idea of condition, elaborated by Éric Dardel...
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(1952): ‘La science géographique présuppose que le monde soit compris géographiquement, que l’homme se sente et se sache lié à la Terre comme être appelé à se réaliser en sa condition terrestre’ (‘The geographical science assumes that the world should be geographically understood, that man feels and knows he is linked to the Earth as a being bound to achieve himself in his terrestrial condition’). This approach is clearly in line with Heidegger’s one. The term ‘condition’ means that space is indexed to the tragic part of humanity, like another condition, that of ‘mortal’. Space is what clings us to the component of ourselves that we cannot design and steer, the complete opposite of what Heidegger calls ‘technique’.

Inhabiting should be, more usefully, I argue, explored as a historical process, a component of contemporary ethics, and a personal field for freedom unfolding. Spatial identities are dynamic, as a dialogical interaction between I the part of the never-ending self-construction of the psyche and II the rationale of permanent deliberation of society as a whole about the becoming of its spatial environment. In this alternative approach, inhabiting should not be seen as a condition but as a horizon. As a matter of fact, inhabiting can be seen as a reciprocal and somehow symmetrical relation between space as environment and spatiality as agency. It requires both strong actors and strong environments. Then, history of space can be read as a process of dual empowerment of both actors and environments.

In a sense, inhabiting has always existed, like love. But, as for
love, it is only because its existence is quite visible in some (not all) contemporary contexts that we are able to construct a retrospective history of inhabiting. This construction strongly suggests that love supposes the relevance of the individual actor within a society, a configuration that is, everybody admits it, a relatively recent invention. In the Paleolithic period, actors were weak and the natural environment was managed in a predatory way: the use of ‘inhabiting’ in this case is disputable. The Neolithic revolution reinforces both entities: productions emerges but at the cost of a progressive destruction of several non-renewable resources. Today, what is at stake in ecological debates is whether the humanity is able to continue to develop itself by creating its own environment in a ‘friendly’, post-lithic relation to the natural one or it has to give up its own self-generated dynamic and go back to a more modest, post-promethean neo-naturalism (figure 7).

In both cases, what is assumed is that environmental (social or natural) logics are stronger than ever but clearly influenced by human agency. Correlatively, the power of the ‘included’ on the ‘including’ is crucial. We can thus conclude that inhabiting has a story, that of the historical emergence of an interactive dialogics between spatial actors and spatial environments.
### Models of Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Agro-industrial</th>
<th>Neo-naturalist</th>
<th>Post-Materialist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature is a set of available resources.</td>
<td>Nature has a point of view and rights.</td>
<td>Nature is a heritage to be invented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development/Environment Relationship</strong></td>
<td>Non-relevant</td>
<td>Antinomy.</td>
<td>Compatibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Development</strong></td>
<td>Hazardous development.</td>
<td>Degrowth</td>
<td>Sustainable development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System of Values</strong></td>
<td>Moral norms.</td>
<td>Morals of duty and guilt.</td>
<td>Ethical values.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Momentum for the Productive System</strong></td>
<td>Predatory production,</td>
<td>Reproductive predation</td>
<td>Reproductive production,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dominant Players</strong></td>
<td>Gemeinschaft (communal community).</td>
<td>Organisations, institutions.</td>
<td>Individuals, societies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spatial Values</strong></td>
<td>Generality, uniformity, locations, circulation, trivialisation, sites.</td>
<td>Idiosyncrasy, parochialism, immobility, ruralness, milieu.</td>
<td>Singularity, universality, places, mobility, urbanity, globalness, environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectation Horizons</strong></td>
<td>Scientism, technological historicism</td>
<td>No cumulative history, no progress.</td>
<td>Self-perfectibility of societies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. Nature and Society: Three Paradigms.

Social actors are spatial actors and generate spatialities but they evolve inside spatial environments that determine their inhabitants and are determined by them as well. The traditional hierarchy between ‘weak’ ordinary individuals and ‘strong’ permanent structures has to be revised. Ordinary inhabitants can by several means – politics, justice or even just their own
spatial choices when they ‘vote with their feet’ – make their say listened to. A triad with actors, objects (non-human, material or immaterial actants) and environments emerges as simple way to classify our ordinary worlds (figure 8).

Figure 8. Actors, Objects, Environments.

The classical mediations between the individual and the World have been weakened (old rural "countries") or at least relativized (nation-states). It is true that the local scale remain a major reality for individuals, even if we take into account the digital communication systems. What is new is that the connection with transnational, supranational, or global scales is much easier than before, giving the individual a capacity to constantly redefine his/her set of relevant scales.

The current Arab Spring is showing the pivotal importance of two scales: locality and globality. The first one is a ‘next door’ neighbourhood, a level based on a ramified extension of the direct acquaintance network. The second one is made of the diffusion of universal values. In the former case, social networks
like Facebook play a major role as in the latter ideas, ideologies, and value circulate through the Web, especially when there is no domestic freedom of press. The Internet is then becoming a black box and is loosing its connection to a particular scale. It includes them all!

Finally, local spaces are increasingly urban areas, among which global cities. These are simultaneously 'concentrates' of the World and central nodes of the global civil society network. Those metropolises are sometimes 20 or 30 million people built-up areas. If we consider enlarged urban areas, we can reach 50 million. Thus local does not mean small anymore. In this context, the issue of urban government is becoming a major concern at the same level of importance as the global governance. This point raises the remaining reluctance of the existing states to accept the emergence of these powerful newcomers that the large cities are.

In this context, places cannot be characterised by their capacity to encompass the entire individual identities, but by their social thickness. We have said that a place is a space with no relevant 'horizontality' (no relevant distance inside them) but with 'verticality'. A place begins to exist when at least two realities, a location and a toponym. But you can stack, pile many more components up, like people, objects, memory, projects, right in the same spatial extension. You will get a thicker place on the same base-map. As a result, a place is a rich situation in which we can experience and experiment the various relations
between actors and environments. In this scope, we can see a large array of interactions. When the place is seen as a whole and has then a political dimension, it can be either downgrading the actor’s role, since the individual has to accept the rules of the environment (experiencing the consequences of a pre-existing social frame), or upgrading it, if the actor has some tools (acting as a citizen) to change the environment (figure 9). In societies of individuals, both situations can involve the same actor, almost at the same time.

![Figure 9. Actors and environments: Variations.](image)

We have many places in our portfolio. None of them are strong enough to lock us in. We can contribute to change a place we inhabit, or add a new place to our spatial capital. In this spatial world marked by relativity, places, be them small or large, matter. They matter because they express the power of co-presence. Being here, even and all the more if here becomes a plural, is an efficient way to capture the productive complexity of
otherness in our own projects. So approached, *placeness* as much to do with urbanity, which can be defined as a combination of density and diversity and makes possible the maximal accessibility to cognitive as well affective otherness. This is naturally true for the city, the place *par excellence*, but also at a larger scale: the World itself can be seen as an archipelago of public spaces. Places constitute a multi-scale constellation of a particular kind of inhabiting devices. We go elsewhere, but *elsewheres* are here, too. We are here(s).

**References**


