

CHAPTER 5

BECOMING A GEOGRAPHER: MASSEY MOMENTS IN A SPATIAL EDUCATION

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Reading the “locality debates” in the late 1980s and early 1990s centred on Doreen Massey’s work propelled my transformation from an economist to a geographer –along with my conception of the world more generally. I was utterly compelled by her feminist reformulation of space and place, which came to me at a crucial conjunctural moment: the end of the Cold War; the apartheid regime’s unbanning of the African National Congress and other political parties; and returning to my native South Africa in 1990 after an absence of 19 years. It has profoundly shaped my research since the 1990s, and remains central to my teaching and political engagements.

Going back to re-read some of Doreen’s work for purposes of this chapter has reaffirmed her powerful influence – but it has also made clear to me our different relations to Marxism, and how they have diverged more widely since the mid-late 1990s. Yet reflecting on these differences and divergences itself represents yet another moment in a spatial education – one that has pushed me to think more carefully about changing interconnections of political and analytical commitments in different spatiohistorical conjunctures.

MOMENTS OF CONVERGENCE

Let me start with a brief account of how Massey appeared on my radar through the locality debates. During the height of debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was teaching at MIT where a different though related debate was raging around what the industrial future would look like after the implosion of the Fordist–Keynesian compromise and, what in retrospect, we can see as the neoliberal onslaught. On one side were Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, with their celebratory account of what they called flexible specialization in *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (1984), and their insistence that “industry should abandon its attachment to standardized

mass production” and emulate small-scale, innovative forms of modern-day craft production such as those in central and northwestern Italy. Fiercely contesting notions of flexible specialization, Ben Harrison maintained that “contrary to prevailing wisdom, the big firm is not only alive and well but is becoming more flexible and efficient”. His book *Lean and Mean: The Changing Landscape of Corporate Power in the Age of Flexibility* was only published in 1994, but by the late 1980s MIT had become a battleground on which the many students working on industrial restructuring felt compelled to line up behind one side or the other.

At the time I was teaching a graduate seminar on agrarian debates, going back to Lenin’s and Chayanov’s sharply opposed interpretations of the Russian *zemstvo* statistics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then circuiting through literature on agrarian transformations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Students were quick to point out parallels with the Piore/Sabel vs. Harrison debate, and also to identify how these bodies of agrarian literature offered conceptual and methodological resources for engaging contemporary questions of industrial restructuring. I vividly recall wonderfully animated discussions in which we were all making what felt like new and exciting connections.

Students also led me to Massey and to geography. Late one afternoon a group of them showed up in my office carrying piles of blue-bound journals with bright pink postit notes indicating articles they thought I should read and the order in which I should read them. These were, it turned out, key interventions in the locality debates. On multiple occasions I have regaled my Berkeley colleagues with the story of how I was immediately captivated – and of how this was my moment of conversion to geography. While partly true, this is also something of an exaggeration. On going back to re-read at least part of the locality debates for purposes of this chapter, I realize that my conversion was a process that extended over the first half of the 1990s, in which Massey’s contributions beyond the locality debates were also vitally important.

At the centre of the locality debates was a research programme entitled *The Changing Urban and Regional System in the UK* (CURS) in which Massey was closely involved, and which grew out of her book *Changing Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1984). In describing the political imperatives that drove CURS, Massey observed that, in the mid-1980s,

Across the political spectrum, causal connections were being made between changes in employment and occupational structure and wider social, ideological and political changes. We were facing the end of the working class, the end of class politics, a new ideology of individualism, a politics of consumption, the

dominance of what were referred to as “new social movements”. All this was being argued, most frequently, from national level statistics. Yet, quite apart from the difficulty of establishing such causal connections in the first place and the dubiousness of the economistic form in which they were usually proposed, the issues of spatial scale and spatial variation were usually ignored ... Something that might be called “restructuring” was clearly going on, but its implications both for everyday life and for the mode and potential of political organizing were clearly highly differentiated and we needed to know how. It was in this context that the localities projects in the United Kingdom were first imagined and proposed. It was research with an immediate, even urgent, relevance beyond academe.

(Massey 1991a: 269)

In my research in rural Java, it was precisely such sweeping claims about agrarian change on the basis of aggregate national level statistics that drove some of my battles with economists, leading me to show how the same sets of data could be interpreted in entirely different ways – and with important political stakes – depending on arbitrary assumptions about labour markets. Hence my argument about the importance of in-depth ethnographic and historical understandings of the intertwining in practice of labour relations with land, credit and other relations of power. Yet I still grappled with the question of how my intensive year-long study in a single village could be used to make more general claims. Along with many others, I thought in terms of relations between “micro” and “macro” levels, and recognized the need for historical and comparative work – but this framing remained deeply unsatisfactory because, as I came to see in retrospect, I lacked a critical understanding of spatiality. What was so immediately captivating about the locality debates was that they were grappling with very similar issues.

I was also intrigued by the intensity of debate. The CURS initiative quickly came under attack, with Neil Smith lobbing the opening salvo. He took aim at CURS for its “reluctance to generalize about the experience of restructuring” (1987: 63), pointing to the danger that CURS would do little more than repeat the empiricist studies of an earlier generation that refused to draw out theoretical or historical conclusions. Smith was also deeply critical of the selection of localities on grounds of scalar incomparability: “like the blind man with a python in one hand and an elephant’s trunk in the other, the researchers are treating all seven localities as the same animal” (1987: 63). Lamenting the retreat from Marxist theory, Smith asserted that there is “nothing inherently or intellectually superior about the unique and the complex” (1987: 67). In the same issue of *Antipode*, Philip Cooke, the coordinator of CURS, quickly

sprang to its defence with comments about the limits of Marxist theory and what he defined as the CURS strategy of “generalization within cases” (Cooke 1987) that served to fan the flames of dissent. David Harvey also entered the fray in 1987 in an issue of *Society and Space*.

Fierce and wide-ranging debates raged over the following four years. In their introduction to a special issue of *Environment and Planning A* in 1991, Duncan and Savage described the locality debates in terms of “the relation between theory and empirical research, the role of Marxism and postmodernism in social science, the difference that space makes, case studies and comparative research, economism versus culture, the contribution of realism, the definition of social objects, the boundary problem” (1991: 156). Their purpose was “to broaden the debate away from the narrow track to which it has recently been confined, and to indicate the wider conceptual and political issues which need to be introduced into the debate” (1991: 163).

In fact, it seems to me, in their contributions to this special issue Doreen Massey and Andrew Sayer effectively brought the locality debates to a close. In different though related ways, they both showed how a large chunk of the debates hinged on problematically aligning and conflating sets of dualisms:

general – specific
global – local
abstract – concrete
theoretical – empirical

It is *not* the case, Massey pointed out, “that the study of locality is a necessary vehicle for, nor equivalent to, empirical research or the study of concrete phenomena” (1991a: 270). Thus, she goes on, the global economy is *general* in the sense of being a geographically large-scale phenomenon, to which can be counterposed internal variations. But it is no less *concrete* than a local one, in the sense of the product of many determinations (which, one might add, is a distinctly Marxist concept): “Those who conflate the local with the concrete, therefore, are confusing geographical scale with processes of abstraction in thought” (Massey 1991a: 270). Massey made two other moves in this essay, both of which she expanded and clarified in later publications that I discuss below: first that locality studies “are not *necessarily* part of the turn to the postmodern” (1991a: 272), and second a critique of Harvey’s (1989) concept of place.

In his essay, Sayer usefully elaborated Massey’s point about the problematic conflation of the local and the concrete (1991: 289–91), along

with deconstructing a number of the other dualisms that underpinned the locality debates. He also engaged questions of generality in a way that I continue to find powerfully useful by distinguishing positivist from relational concepts of generality. Generality₁ refers to statistical representativeness, and is associated with positivist conceptions of discrete, bounded objects that stand in external relations to one another. Generality₂, in contrast, turns on a conception of internal relations in which differentiation and particularity arise from *interdependencies*. Hence, Sayer argued, participants in the localities and other debates have been talking past one another by using different concepts of generality:

Thus, when we ask whether certain research findings from a particular case are “generalisable” we could answer in terms of generality₁, that is according to whether identical or similar findings are common elsewhere. In the case of research on localities the answer might often be negative. Yet, even if we thought that nothing was generalisable in this sense, it would not follow that the implications of the study were merely parochial and of no relevance for wider society, for they might be generalisable in terms of generality₂; that is, the particular or the unique might be internally related to some aspects of the whole or other parts of the system. In this second sense it is possible to argue that (some aspects of) the whole are “contained” in the part and even that the part imprints onto or structures the rest of the whole for this reason, locality studies need not be solely of parochial interest.

(Sayer 1991: 298)

Massey’s and Sayer’s interventions cut through much of the labyrinthine underbrush in which the locality debate had become entangled, and cleared the way for much sharper and clearer understandings of how intensive studies of specific localities can illuminate broader processes. In retrospect it’s striking how contemporary Urban Studies debates over what Cindi Katz (2017) in her wickedly funny way calls “splanetary urbanization” (as in mansplaining) are traversing some of the same terrain as the old locality debates in a similarly gendered fashion.

On going back to re-read the locality debates, I can also see in retrospect how several further sets of interventions by Massey were crucial to my own efforts to come to grips with these questions: her 1992 *New Left Review* article on “Politics and Space-Time”; her critical engagement in “A Global Sense of Place” (1991b) and “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place” (1993) with Harvey’s (1989) deployment of Heideggerian concepts of place and “the local”; and the superb General Introduction to *Space, Place, and*

Gender (1994). Taken together, Massey's moves beyond the localities debates were central to my subsequent research, teaching and sense of myself as a geographer – along with a growing appreciation of the political stakes of critical conceptions of spatiality.

I vividly recall my excitement on reading "Politics and Space-Time", and the sense of being catapulted well beyond the locality debates. Most immediately I was struck by the powerfully elegant way Massey showed how both Ernesto Laclau and Frederic Jameson invoke seemingly opposite conceptions of space and time in relation to politics, while relying on similarly problematic dualistic (and Cartesian) counter-positions of space and time. She then went on to underscore the inherently gendered character of such dichotomies – and thence to sketch an alternative "view from physics", showing how Laclau's and Jameson's dualistic conceptions of space and time accord with those of Newton, in contrast to her own relational conception akin to that of Einstein: "It is not that the interrelations between objects occur *in* space and time; it is these relationships themselves which *create/define* space and time" (1992b: 79; emphasis in original).

It was this essay, along with Neil Smith and Cindi Katz's (1993) equally lucid exposition of the limits of spatial metaphors that drew me to Lefebvre and *The Production of Space* (1991). In re-reading at least some of Massey's work for purposes of this essay, I'm struck that "Politics and Space-Time" is the most explicitly Lefebvrian piece of hers of which I am aware. In *For Space* (2005), for instance, Lefebvre makes a brief appearance in the introduction to a chapter on Bergson, Deleuze, Laclau and de Certeau – and then falls out of sight in the remainder of the book. What seems to be at stake here is what Arun Saldhana (2013: 44) calls Massey's "ambivalent relation ... with the Marxist legacy", on which I will reflect later in this chapter.

Also representing a leap beyond the locality debates was Massey's insistent refusal to separate space and place, and her elaboration in the early 1990s of an "extraverted sense of place" (1991b, 1993b, 1994) not as a bounded unit, but nodal points of interconnection in socially produced space:

If ... the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings ... But the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself. Important, it includes relations which stretch beyond – the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside.

(Massey 1994: 5)

In the first instance this formulation grew out of Massey's vigorous critique of Harvey's (1989) assertion of any focus on place and "the local" as necessarily reactionary. Subsequently of course it remained central to her work, even as she moved in the post-Marxist direction charted by Laclau and Mouffe – while, at the same time, insisting on "thinking radical democracy spatially".

Massey's explicitly feminist formulations of space and place constituted for me an incredibly powerful set of tools that were simultaneously analytical and political. Most immediately relevant was their close congruence with what Sayer (1991) called generality₂, enabling what I have come to call critical ethnography and relational comparison (Hart 2002, 2006, 2016). Yet despite a close sense of affinity with her signal contributions, my efforts to further hone and elaborate these tools in relation to the political engagements and challenges I have confronted – mainly although by no means exclusively in post-apartheid South Africa – have taken me in a different direction from that in which Massey moved following the locality debates. In reflecting on how our trajectories have diverged in recent years, I've come to realize that it's necessary to reach further back in space-time to earlier conjunctures in each of our lives.

MOMENTS OF DIVERGENCE

In discussing Massey's political-intellectual formation, let me start with her own account in "Stories So Far': A Conversation with Doreen Massey" in *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey* edited by David Featherstone and Joe Painter (2013). In response to a question about key inspirations and influences, she began by emphasizing the political movements in which she had been engaged in the late 1960s and '70s "with the emergence of Marxism, feminism, sexual liberation, being part of the GLC [Greater London Council] in the 1980s, or the kind of stuff that has happened more recently" and the urgent debates they provoked. But, she went on to say, "If there is one person that really influenced me early on, and this is a very strange person to cite, it is Louis Althusser" (Featherstone and Painter 2013: 253). Her affinity for Althusser, she explained, grew from her alienated response to readings of early Marx – more specifically, from "its intimations of a human nature, and as a feminist I couldn't buy it. So much of it was very essentialist about sexual divisions of labour and "natural" divisions of labour. The heterosexual family was treated completely unproblematically. And so I found it difficult to buy into Marxism, even though I was strongly committed to issues of class" (Featherstone and Painter 2013: 254). She explained how Althusser "utterly changed my view of life and of Marxism". First, was his anti-essentialism embodied in the phrase "There is no point of

departure”: “as a young woman who was trying to escape the norms, who felt she didn’t conform to any of the given descriptions of ‘woman,’ and who wanted a way of challenging them – that first entry into anti-essentialism ... was utterly important” (Featherstone and Painter 2013: 254). She spoke as well of her affinity with Althusser’s critique of the economic determinism of the French Communist Party.

Responding to a question about regional inequality, she called attention to *Spatial Divisions of Labour* as an expression of thinking relationally, which is “one of the things I have most taken from Marx” (Featherstone and Painter 2013: 257), and discussed how it grew out of her concern with regional inequality and uneven development – which, growing up in the northwest of England, she had “lived with, through and kind of in combat with” since childhood. The book was about trying to conceptualize a relational geography of power with the capitalist structure of class – and from the perspective of class. By the early 1990s with “A Global Sense of Place” the emphasis had shifted to other dimensions of difference, especially ethnicity: “It’s an interesting shift and reflects a more general move within geography and the social sciences away from class and towards, especially, hybridity.” She went on to say, though, that “Personally I think it is time for that balance to be redressed”, pointing to “the shift from a social democratic Keynesian hegemony to a neoliberal one” (Featherstone and Painter 2013: 257).

Discussing the significance of concepts of “hegemony” and “social settlements” to her work, she reflected

I guess another set of influences has come from Gramsci, or from a Gramscian school of thought, especially around Stuart Hall, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and others. Decades ago (I think it was in the early ’80s) we were all members of a group called “The Hegemony Group” – another very challenging discussion forum ... It was related to that wider move to take culture and power more seriously – and the whole notion of the *construction* of a society and of its common sense; the way different instances both had a degree of autonomy and intersected; and of the course the possibility of those moments of conjunctural rupture when the balance of social forces may be put in question and changed.
(Featherstone and Painter 2013: 258)

She went on to note that

through all of this I have been trying to weave a thread about the relation between space and power, about the nature of space and

the nature of place. The notion of hegemony, for instance, implies both place and a particular – contested – notion of place.

(Featherstone and Painter 2013: 258)

In the discussion of Gramsci and hegemony she specifically called attention to the work of Stuart Hall on Thatcherism, and noted that at *Soundings* they were trying to engage that kind of analysis again. This was, of course, the Kilburn Manifesto, launched in 2013.

Stuart Hall's work in relation to that of Gramsci has also been central to my own intellectual-political formation – although it has taken me in directions that diverge from Laclau and Mouffe, and from some of Massey's later work. These divergences derive from the conditions in which I came to embrace feminism in apartheid South Africa; from engagements with the US anti-apartheid movement from the late 1970s; and from my efforts to comprehend and participate in the twists and turns of post-apartheid South Africa since 1994 in which the past is far from dead.

Like Massey I was swept along by second-wave feminism in the late 1960s. Yet I also found it difficult to reconcile with my position of race/class privilege at the height of the most vicious period of apartheid, and lacked the conceptual resources to grapple with these tensions. It was only in the 1980s, when I became aware of the statement by the Combahee River Collective, that I was able to start confronting these challenges. Another important set of influences in my efforts to come to grips with feminism in relation to race and class was participating in discussions at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe in 1983–4 that culminated in an innovative collection of essays on the intertwining of race, class and gender entitled *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (1988), edited by Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen.

From the late 1970s, by far the most important political commitment for me was the anti-apartheid movement. On arriving at Cornell at the beginning of 1972, I discovered staggering ignorance about apartheid South Africa. That changed in 1976 with the Soweto uprising, and the murder by the apartheid state of Steve Biko in September 1977 served to thrust South Africa further to the forefront of popular attention. It also provided the impetus for the movement focused on divestment and sanctions. At Cornell I participated in setting up an anti-apartheid movement in 1977–8, and then worked with the African National Congress when I moved to Boston in the fall of 1978. It was the divestment movement on campuses throughout the US – as well as churches and trade unions – that paved the way for sanctions with the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, when a number of Republicans joined Democrats in overriding Ronald Reagan's veto of the bill.

Through the 1980s, living in the Boston area, I was split between an Asian academic side and a South African political side that involved mobilizing students and teaching undergraduate courses on South Africa. As part of this activism I paid close attention to South African race v. class debates, and how they had evolved since I left the country at the end of 1971. On one side of this debate, in its crudest form, was a liberal argument claiming that racial oppression was an archaic holdover that would dissolve as black South Africans were drawn into the economy as producers and consumers – in other words, that apartheid was antithetical to capitalism. Essentially this was the argument invoked by many US university administrators and others opposing divestment of shares of companies operating in South Africa. Drawing on the so-called Sullivan Principles drawn up by a segment of corporate America, they asserted in good paternalistic fashion that divestment would hurt black South Africans more than it would help them – which was, of course, an entirely specious claim.

The counter-argument in the race v. class debate was that apartheid was functional to capitalism. Put forward most forcefully by Frederick Johnstone in a 1970 article entitled “White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today”, this argument was instrumental in my decision to leave South Africa in 1971. Yet I had also become painfully aware of the inadequacies of this position, which derived from its grounding in dependency theory, for understanding the massive uprisings against both capital and the apartheid state, starting with the resurgence of a militant labour movement in Durban in 1972 and gathering force over the 1970s and ’80s. It was this dynamic that US students urgently needed to grasp in order to situate their activism – and the race v. class debates, in their crude as well as more nuanced forms, were singularly unhelpful.

This is where Stuart Hall stepped into the picture. In 1980 Hall published an extraordinary essay entitled “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance” that effectively transcended the South African race v. class debates, and for me has been profoundly formative. At the time, Harold Wolpe’s “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa” (1972) represented by far the most sophisticated contribution to these debates, framed in neo-Althusserian terms of articulation of modes of production. By redefining the concept of articulation and shifting it to a Gramscian terrain, Hall’s analysis of the relations between racism and class opened up vitally important political and analytical possibilities (Hart 2007). Hall’s essay may well have been shaped by discussions in “The Hegemony Group” to which Massey makes reference, which included Laclau and Mouffe. Very importantly, though, it was also a product of Hall’s deep association with the ANC in exile, with the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, and with Harold Wolpe,

who escaped from an apartheid prison in 1963 and fled to Britain where he and Hall became close friends.

Hall's essay pointed me in directions quite different from the move that Massey made – along with Laclau, Mouffe, many other former Althusserians, and in part Hall himself in his later years – to post-structuralism/s broadly conceived. First, reading Hall's 1980 essay in conjunction with his explication of Marx's notes on method in the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (2003 [1973]) enabled an open understanding of dialectics sharply at odds with any sort of Hegelian teleology. Second, it was through Hall that I came to take Gramsci very seriously. In the process I came to a distinctively different reading of Gramsci from that of Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe – but closely compatible with the brilliant explication of Fanon's work by the Ghanaian scholar Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996). Speaking of Gramsci as a "precocious Fanonian", Sekyi-Otu foresaw with remarkable prescience the directions in which post-apartheid South Africa would move. Both theoretical orientations contributed to my growing recognition of the profound importance of a relational (dare I say dialectical?) understanding of the production of space/time indebted initially to Massey and subsequently to Lefebvre and other geographers.

Stefan Kipfer and I have tried to suggest the mutually synergistic relations among these approaches as well as some strands of feminist theory (Kipfer and Hart 2013), along with their political stakes. Propelled by the horrors of Trumpism, I am now focusing on how resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in South Africa and India since the end of the Cold War can illuminate contemporary forces in the US – and that can also speak to problematic tendencies to analyse Trumpism primarily in terms of either race or class/neoliberalism. This work builds on my effort to extend the method of relational comparison in a more explicitly conjunctural direction (Hart 2016), and remains grounded in critical understandings of space/time and place.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, I want to emphasize that the point of outlining how my intellectual trajectory has both converged with and diverged from that of Doreen Massey has emphatically *not* been to assert the "correctness" of one theory (or reading of theory) over and above another. Rather, it has been to underscore that our theoretical predilections are always partial, situated and politically driven, and that the key criterion is always that of *usefulness* – in other words, what is the *work* that different conceptions of the world can do? Where Doreen and I are in complete agreement is that critical understandings of space and place along the lines she charted are not just part of academic debates, but constitute key analytical and political resources in the increasingly dangerous conditions in which we find ourselves.

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