

Social space

In geography, and even more so in the humanities and social sciences, the term 'social space' is both very important (and even essential) and polysemous (and even elusive). When it refers to or is articulated with what is also sometimes called 'geographical space', it is to give it a social content that varies according to usage. At least two distinctions can be made. The first classically opposes social space (in general) - what can be called the spatial dimension of the social - and a social space (in particular). The second contrasts terrestrial space as a product of society with the association between a given space and the social relations that take place in it: the space of a social group according to the definition introduced in 1969 by Anne Buttimer in English-speaking geography; the space of a society, of a social system for part of French-speaking 'social geography'.

In France, the term 'social space' probably first appeared in the 1950s and 1960s in the writings of sociologists, before being used by geographers in the following decade. In geography, the word 'space' had indeed been used regularly at least since Paul Vidal de la Blache, but without having the status of a concept, and without being defined. The first proposals criticising the Vidalian approach and bringing 'space' to the forefront date from the 1940s through the expression 'Organisation_de_l'espace' (Robic, 1982). In the years that followed, the gradual construction of a new sector of public action around 'regional planning' and then 'spatial planning' had a lot to do with the success of this expression among geographers. But from the 1950s onwards, other uses of the spatial lexicon also multiplied. The word was increasingly used in conjunction with an adjective referring more or less to an existing discipline: 'economic space', 'social', 'personal', 'geographical', etc. One might therefore think that the lexicon that was being constructed at that time reflected a disciplinary and peaceful division of scientific work. However, this spatial lexicon manifested, and gave rise to, intense competition in the academic field, as well as on the planning scene, where geographers seemed to be dominated without being completely ignored.

At first, geographers tended to rally behind the banner of 'geographical space'. This expression, which they may not have coined, was to become emblematic of the discipline and its renewal in the 1970s, in the image of the new journal that would use it as its title. But not everyone was satisfied with this expression. Some people turned to the terms 'lived space' and 'social space', used in particular in sociology (initially urban) and anthropology, by researchers as different as Paul-Henri Chombart de Lauwe, soon joined by Raymond Ledrut and Henri Lefebvre, then Georges Condominas, Pierre Bourdieu, etc., who proposed definitions that were themselves very different from each other. It is one of Lefebvre's most general proposals that seems to have inspired them in the first place (or strengthened their convictions), no doubt because it can claim the status of a specific research object, while clearly placing those who take it up in the field of social sciences: for Lefebvre (2000), (social) space is a (social) product; it does not exist outside the society that produces it. It is therefore in the more or less close wake of this work, and around this central proposition, that most geographers who took up the term from the 1970s onwards placed themselves. We find them above all among those who promote an "anthropocentric" or even "socio-centric" conception of geography, through the geography of 'lived space' and then 'social geography' in particular, quickly joined by the geographers at the origin of the journal *EspacesTemps*. For Jacques Lévy and Christian Grataloup (1976), *'the only possible geography is the science of social space, of the spatial dimension of society'*.

Although it was 'lived space' that made Armand Frémont famous, he used other syntagms that he tried to articulate, including 'social space', which was present from the early 1970s. *La_région_espace_vacu* (1976) thus includes a chapter on 'social spaces', whose definition is quickly discussed in the introduction: *'Social space defines the territory of a group or class in a given region'*, he begins by recalling, but this is to better put forward 'a richer and more synthetic conception [which] makes social space a mesh in the weave of hierarchical relations of human space' (1976, p. 119). A few years later, with the other authors of the 1984 textbook-manifesto entitled *Geographie sociale*, social space clearly takes centre stage. It is presented as *'the upper level, the most encompassing, the most complex level of geographical space'* (Hérin, 1984, p. 108) - which shows in passing that the latter expression has not been abandoned for all that - and then as a synonym for 'socio-spatial combination', or a system of relations between social relations and "spatial relations" (relations to places): *'The space of work and capital, of issues and conflicts, of social practices or social relations inscribed in architecture, social space is, in each of its dimensions, simultaneously a product, a "representation" and a symbol through which the dialectic of the social and the spatial is expressed.'*

Yet, in what may seem a strange paradox, the term will gradually disappear from the literature, in the very movement where the discipline is increasingly defined as a social science. The least we can say is that the expression is not very visible in contemporary geography, and moreover is absent from most French-language dictionaries. The proponents of 'social geography' themselves have tended to neglect it, apart from a book co-edited by Guy Di Majo, which brought it back to the fore in its title (2005). There are perhaps two main reasons for this paradox. On the one hand, like Di Majo himself, the lexicon of the discipline underwent a

'territorial' turn from the 1990s onwards, which clearly competed with it: [territory](#) can serve both as a concept designating the space of a group or community and as a new way of qualifying the object of the discipline. On the other hand, and more broadly, it is very likely that the adjective 'social' is no longer considered necessary at a time when it is almost clear to everyone in this social science geography (which integrates all or part of this renewed physical geography and renamed 'environmental geography') that space is social because it is a product and/or dimension of the social world. For those who share this view, the expression 'social space' is probably seen as a pleonasm.

Fabrice Ripoll

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