

Place

In their writings, "classical" geographers and a certain number of contemporary authors refer to what common meaning defines as places, that is to say determined and singular portions of space to which toponyms are attached. In French the word is "lieu" ("place", from which the English "place" is derived, having more specialised meanings). It was not used for a long time in such writings, "contrée" or "pays" being often used instead (much as "country" and "land" were used in English writings) perhaps because it was considered not to belong to scientific language as defined by authors of works on geography. It was not until the paradigmatic breaks of the 1960s and 1970s that in addition to its commonplace usage, two precise acceptations of the term emerged.

The first acceptation belongs to the field of spatial analysis. Place (lieu) is defined in this case as an elementary spatial unit the position of which is both identifiable in a system of coordinates, and dependent upon relationships with other places in the framework of spatial interactions (Béguin, 1979).

Places are where geographical phenomena are localised, whether these phenomena are population, material objects or functions. These phenomena constitute attributes enabling the characterisation of the said places. Spatial analysis studies the spatial arrangement of places, attempting to find organisational logics, places being grouped as a scatter of points, or inter-related with other places via connection points (nodes, intersections, etc) to form a network (Pumain, Saint Julien, 1997).

A certain number of indicators attempt to assess degrees of concentration, specialisation, or accessibility of different places, so as to get a picture both of the specific features of each and of their match with general interpretation models. Many models place [distance](#) between places - and the attempts by human societies to reduce distances, or for certain groups to increase them - at the heart of their functioning. Of course distance between places is relative, and the measures that enable definition of distance vary according to human group, territory and epoch. It is then usage and attitude that make places: in a sense there are places of all sizes, from local to global.

It is well-known that [distance](#) constitutes a form of resistance to exchanges and flows between places. It instates space and renders contact more difficult. It also poses the question of the scale of a place. For certain geographers, place is local because on this scale distance can be considered null, and the multiple interactions and spatial familiarity easier.

The second acceptation of place takes on different aspects, but generally revolves around the notion of a relationship between one or several individuals and a portion of space, or relationships between individuals within a portion of space.

In 1974, the journal "Progress in Geography" published an article by Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place": a humanistic perspective". By way of a "humanistic geography" approach, Tuan reviewed the concept of place before other English-language geographers such as J.N. Entrikin and R.D. Sack took up the same theme. In France, with the exception of the work by A. Frémont on the espace vécu (the lived-in space) (1976) interest in the concept of place came late. Along the lines of social, cultural and representational geographies, V. Berdoulay, B. Debarbieux or G. Di Méo from the 1980s embarked on an exploration of the English-language research themes.

In the humanistic perspective, the study of place is part of a reflection on geographicity (géographicité) (see the second acceptation of this term as proposed by Marie-Claire Robic) of the human being and is close to the concept of territory. This approach relates directly to the work by Eric Dardel, and also to Heidegger's conception of space and the notion of inhabiting, as well as to Bachelard's phenomenology. Place is where the relationship of man to earth or soil is the closest, but it can also, for Dardel, refer to the entire world as basis for human existence. Place and man merge; place is part of the identity of the person who derives from it - each human being defines him/herself, his/her environment, and in particular his/her social belonging in relation to place, and individuals give identity, and even more fundamentally existence, to place. This narrow relationship enables the metaphor of roots, and supposes a temporal dimension. Place is set in time; it is memory and time in crystallised form.

Place in humanistic geography is more than a point or dot, a name or a locality: it has meaning. There is a "sense of place" an

identity, a personality, according to some authors. This means that values can be attributed to place. For instance there is a whole corpus of literature devoted to what are known in French as "hauts-lieux" which are symbolic or otherwise exemplary places or venues (such as Venice for the arts or Mecca for Islam).

It should be noted in passing that Vidal de la Blache in his "Tableau de la géographie de la France" (1903) studies France as a place: the "personality" of the national territory, references to roots and to history, the particular social ties that form on the French soil, the genius loci (the expression he uses) that belongs to that soil, are some of the features of his writings that link fairly directly to the contemporary approaches to the concept.

Alongside this ontological relationship between individuals and soil, place can also be approached as the product of a social relationship; a space made into place when relationships develop between individuals in a situation of co-presence. The abolition of distance between them appears as the main factor facilitating these relationships. The work by Marc Augé on "non-places" (non-lieux) (1992) casts some light on this approach: he defines them as mono-functional, partitioned spaces characterised by incessant circulation or traffic, that overall do not foster social relationships.

Envisaging place in the post-modern context opens up new perspectives. If places are solely the product of relationships - between human beings and the soil, and among humans - and above all the product of an awareness of these relationships - places and non-places do not exist in the absolute. An airport (one of the examples proposed by Augé) may be "inhabited"; it is a potential non-place the outcome of which is linked to social practices and behaviours. Along the same lines of reasoning, places can be nomadic and /or ephemeral. They only exist by way of interactions, they exist for the duration of an event or a market, or else follow those who take their homes with them. Thus in the film Playtime, a place arises, almost accidentally, inside the partitioned, soul-less space of a restaurant. Place is a potentiality that human existence and/or social relationships implement.

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