

Turbulent Spaces of Fragments and Flows

FELIX STALDER

Notions of homogeneity and linearity have played a key role in the theories underpinning the modern nation state, first in Europe, and then beyond. Since the Westphalian peace treaty ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648, the nation state has been defined by political sovereignty over a continuous, unambiguous territory inhabited by people turned into 'a people' (*ein Volk*, in German) on the basis of some more or less imagined, more or less coerced, communality; be that language, culture, history, manifest destiny, blood lines or something else. These notions have long been criticised, and with the all-too-visible erosion of political sovereignty over the last decade, their appeal has been seriously weakened in the domain of political theory. Yet, homogeneity and linearity have not disappeared as guiding ideologies of dominant political practice. On the contrary, they are reappearing with a vengeance in the realm of the market, expanded from a national framework to a global one.

As in the political field, the homogeneity of the market is also based on a particular concept of space as a static container, a stable Euclidean stage upon which history unfolds. Such a notion of space also informs those who try to image a counter-vision usually centering around concepts such as 'a global civil society'. Proposing that such a notion of space is untenable, this essay attempts to draw out some consequences of the spatial turbulences that are forcing us to radically rethink the space of politics and markets today.

Abandoning the commonsense notion of space as the unchanging ground upon which we stand, we can see that it is not an a-historical given. If we look at space from a historical perspective, we can observe; at least from the vantage point of Europe; space as an

acceleration and expansion of society since the beginning of modernity, interrupted by relatively short periods of deceleration and contraction. Put simply: collectively we learned, over time, to manage more space in less time. Technology played a major enabling role in this 'time-space compression'. Cities grew into metropolises, a world economy emerged, the whole planet became interconnected from the 17th century onwards, in close relationship with advances in communication, transportation, and, not to forget, accounting.

As profound as this development has been, it did not touch the basic definition and characteristics of space. Following sociologist and communications theorist Manuel Castells, we can define space as the material basis of time-sharing. In order to interact in real-time, one has to be in the same space, which has always been a single place. Space, then, could be thought of as a series of places, one next to the other. Indeed, time-space compression has meant that the relative distance between places was shrinking, yet their relationship remained characterised by just that: a distance that always expressed itself as a time lag in interaction. The assumption that entities which are in closer proximity can interact more quickly and that the time lag grows linearly with distance remained basically correct, despite the capacity to span time and space more extensively, quickly and reliably.

At some point in the 1980s, this changed. The historical development of time-space compression reached its limit. Distances had been shrinking to the point where the conventional notion of distance as a function of geography became meaningless. Yet rather than space disappearing, which some postmodernists predicted as the 'terminal condition', what we have been witnessing is the emergence of an entirely new kind of space, aptly termed the *space of flows* by Castells, the first and still most perceptive analyst of this historical discontinuity.

Space of Flows

The concept of the space of flows points to the emergence of a new material basis for time-sharing based on instantaneous electronic information flows. This has been long in the making, starting with the telegraph in the mid-19th century. Its real foundations, however, were laid in the 1970s when the development of the microprocessor coincided with capitalist firms restructuring themselves in order to escape a deep economic crisis. This created the push and the pull to incorporate into social institutions technology capable of generating and processing information flows. The space of flows then expanded massively. In the process, the physical environment in which these institutions operated also became restructured by the logic of the space of flows.

The key to this logic is that it is placeless, even if its physical components, quite obviously, remain place-based. Even a data centre is located somewhere. The people who operate it have their homes somewhere as well. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the major financial centres are still located in New York, London and Tokyo, yet the dynamics of the global financial markets cannot be explained with reference to these places. The same logic also infuses the production of, say, clothing. Designed in Northern Italy, produced in Sri Lanka, marketed in New York, it is sold around the world in franchise stores that are locally managed but globally controlled. What is emerging is a new social

geography, highly dynamic and variable, which is no longer based on physical proximity but on the logical integration of functional units, including people and buildings, through the space of flows. The physical location of the various units is determined by the unequal ability of different places to contribute to the programmes embedded in the various networks. Whether production is located in China, Sri Lanka or Bulgaria is, from the point of view of the overall operation, irrelevant, as long as the factory is capable of providing the required services competitively.

In short, the connection between functional and physical distance has been broken. Yet, this is not the death of distance. Rather, distance is being reconfigured into a non-linear pattern.

Thus, we have certain areas within, say, Sofia, whose developmental trajectory does not follow that of Bulgaria as a whole, but is determined by other free trade zones in emerging economies. Indeed, the very concept of the free trade zone indicates that certain locales have been decoupled from their geographic environment. In a legally binding way, they are governed by a different set of rules than their 'host countries'. This in itself is not entirely new. Shipping harbours have always enjoyed certain exemptions from taxation, a freedom granted to stimulate trade and commerce. Yet traditionally, these pockets of extra-territoriality have been located at the borders of territories, facilitating the transition between them. Now, these zones are sprinkled across territories, severely undermining national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This has been the story of early 1990s, the result of commercially driven globalisation.

Fast-forward to today. The ability to operate translocally in real-time has diffused through society at large, though quite unequally. Small firms, semi-legal and fully illegal organisations, social movements and even individuals can network globally with relative ease. Thus, more and more places on which the social actors in these networks rely are becoming decoupled from their local environments, and determined by translocal flows of people, goods, money, and culture. This is happening on all scales, including the centres of the global economy as well as the extensive threaded networks of the grey economies, which function as simultaneous and parallel global production chains.

These networks are highly specific. They can easily adapt their components as required by changing demands or self-selected goals. Thus, they only need to cooperate with those who match their particular mix of shared culture and purpose. However, cultural specificity is not an option but a functional requirement for organised networks. Relying on adaptation and cooperation rather than on command and control, they need to establish a distinct internal culture in order to build trust, and facilitate communication. Corporate mergers apparently fail so often because the managers cannot fashion a new and sufficiently collaborative 'corporate culture' from the existent ones.

On a societal level, the cultural differentiation between the networks is growing. From within the network, this appears as a process of integration and 'community' or 'team' building. From the point of view of physical space, which none of the network actors ever escapes, this appears as a process of fragmentation and of the increasing isolation of social actors from one another, despite the fact that they might share the same physical

space. Again, this is not just an elite process, but it has advanced to such a degree that it applies to the highly connected as well as to the seemingly disconnected. In fact, the two groups mirror each other. In many ways people are not 'more connected' than before, but rather, the connections which characterised dominant processes (even within the counter-culture, or the grey economies) are increasingly made and maintained in the space of flows. The flip side of this ability to forge translocal connections is that those connections made in the space of places are becoming weakened. There is no need to relate to others just because they are physically present.

Yet, this need not necessarily be evidence of hyper-individualisation, but of the building of local nodes able to act within translocal networks. The size of each node depends on this function within the network, and ranges from the lonely coder with a broadband connection, to large production facilities on the ground, as well as small, specialised firms and family enterprises of all sizes. Nevertheless, places (and people) can be bypassed, rendered invisible from the point of view of those operating through the space of flows. This new form of exclusion applies to entire regions as well as to particular neighbourhoods. It works on all scales and in all domains.

In cities, this expresses itself through the twin processes of global homogenisation and local diversification. We have a McDonald's in virtually every city on the planet. Yet, increasingly, there is no way to predict what will be located right next to it. On the ground, the many globals and locals mix in seemingly random ways. The result is a kind of a patchwork of cultures and their physical expressions jumbled together in agglomerations, sprawling metropolitan regions held together by fast transportation networks. These regions emerge without much planning. Often they don't even have a name (such as the nameless region comprising London, Paris and Amsterdam, that can be traversed in either direction within a few hours). The people who live on or travel between these patches ; are, quite naturally, building their own cultures that enable them to deal with this new, fragmented reality, increasingly without reference to the geographic place as whole. Consequently, the focus of this new 'community' or network-centric culture is on internal rather than on external communication. Community building is both a means and an end. Community, understood as translocal networks, is what constitutes a new space, a realm of action ; for the CEO as much as for the illegal migrant. But these similarities are merely structural. The practical realities that each actor is able to generate are, of course, very different.

Fragmented Places, Heterogeneous Cultures

Historical experience has shown that the attempts to impose homogeneity within nation states and defend that against others has involved considerable violence ; ranging from overt war to the sometimes subtle devaluation of all kinds of minorities and outsiders, who threatened the social ideals of a unified people pacified within clearly demarcated territories. It also established a new ruling class: those with command over large administrative bodies, creating and benefiting from the new homogeneity.

For a long time, the tension between idealised homogeneity and factual heterogeneity was thought of as a lack of 'development', a kind of residual from earlier, messier and less enlightened times, poised to disappear in due course. This ideal can no longer be maintained. It is not the lack of 'development' that is producing such turbulence on the ground. On the contrary, the shattering of space into re-configurable fragments, threaded together on the basis of networked particularities, is a result of the most advanced socio-economic processes. So, rather than a neatly ordered pyramid of governance with the national institutions at the top, we have a virtually endless number of actors ; some public, some private, some commercial, some non-profit ; who produce governance effects through the endless reconfiguration of their relationships, based on the particular issue they want to influence. In the process, basic categories of politics have been rendered meaningless, such as the distinction between interior and exterior affairs, between public and private institutions, and so on.

The governance effects thus produced have so far not been particularly successful (in terms of reaching their own stated goals such as reducing poverty, saving the environment, stopping nuclear proliferation). Yet at the very least, they reflect a tacit acknowledgment that the field of political actors has become extremely mixed; this can be understood as an acknowledgment of the realities of fragmented space. Strangely enough, on the level of the market, the ideological emphasis on homogeneity and unity has grown stronger, rather than weaker. We are supposed to live in a single global market. In order to maintain this fiction, entire domains of economic activities, comprising the majority of people in many countries, have to be declared 'illegal'. I'm not referring here to traditional organised crime, but to the vast areas of economic activities that happen outside of legal regulation, undertaken by people who have no recourse to the legal system, but who manage ; sometimes very successfully, at other times barely at subsistence level ; to produce goods and services on which a vast number of people are dependent for daily survival.

It would be entirely wrong to think of these 'grey markets' as backward, small, local affairs involving only basic goods. Rather, they also include global production and distribution chains, high-tech goods, and considerable ingenuity and innovation. These are constantly downplayed, ignored and criminalised by the dominant discourses and practices. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of markets is an essential aspect of contemporary economies and will not go away. 'Development' is not a road out of social messiness, but one leading deeper into it.

Thus, if we want to understand what is happening today, we have to get rid of the master narratives. The massive stage upon which these could unfold has been shattered. The social reality of space is no longer homogenous and stable. Rather, we have to rebuild our categories of experience and understanding based on our recognition of the spaces of turbulences produced by fragmented locales and translocal flows. Our goal should not be to find uniform solutions for the problems of others (e.g., the poor or marginalised). Rather, we have to devise flexible frameworks that can be appropriated by networks of different people ; on terms respectful of their uniqueness, rather than through the imposition of

homogeneity. An understanding of how deeply the social construction of space has been transformed over the last few decades is an essential part of this process.

Further Reading and Viewing

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception* (transl. Kevin Attell) (University of Chicago Press, 2005, Chicago).

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Ballentine Books, 1972, New York).

Benjamin, Solomon. "Analog to Digital: Valorising Peripheries to Fear New Hydras". In *IP and the City*, World Information City newspaper, Vienna/Bangalore (2005), p. 8.

http://static.world-information.org/infopaper/wi_ipcityedition.pdf

. Incommunicado interview, 11 May 2005, 38 min. <http://www.v2v.cc/node/126>

Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. I (2nd edn.) (Blackwell, 2000, Oxford).

De Landa, Manuel. *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* (Swerve, 1997, New York).

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004, New York).

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell, 1989, Oxford).

Innis, Harold A. *Empire and Communications* (Clarendon Press, 1950, Oxford).

McLuhan, Marshall and Eric McLuhan. *Laws of Media: The New Science* (University of Toronto Press, 1988, Toronto).

Virilio, Paul. "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" In *CTheory* (27 August 1995).

Wills, John E. (Jr). *1688: A Global History* (W.W. Norton, 2001, New York).