Culture and Space – anthropological approaches

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Among the key concepts in anthropology, "space" holds a prominent position. On first glance, relations of "culture" and "space" seem to be quite obvious: spatial relations are a central variable influencing human behaviour and cognition, while major methodological strategies in anthropology have been closely related to spatial boundaries of "the field".

Nonetheless, in the last decades anthropology's relationship to "space" has become increasingly uneasy. Starting out with a critique of spatially bounded notions of "culture" and "the field", the concept of "space" has also been contested. Resulting from this debate, we have been left with a fragmented assortment of phrases and metaphors referring to spatial aspects of anthropological topics, ranging from "moving targets" and "global ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1991) to "transnational social space", "diaspora space" (Brah 1996) or "siting culture" (Olwig/ Hastrup 1997). As not uncommon with metaphors, their value is more suggestive than analytical. Although there have been valuable attempts (see Hauser-Schäublin/Dickhardt 2003), a fully-formulated anthropological theory of "culture and space" does not exist yet. For theoretical orientation, anthropologists refer to developments in geography, urban studies or sociology.

The aims of this paper are twofold. For the first part, presenting a short overview of anthropology's changing relationship to "space", I have made extensive use of Schoenfelder (2000) and Tomforde (2006), who both provide reviews of the emerging anthropology of space. Additionally, this summary is based on discussions of space and culture by Hauser-Schäublin and Dickhardt (2003). In the second part, I shall discuss some conceptual problems of relating "culture" and "space" in recent research on diaspora and transnational networks.

To illustrate the wide variety of possible topics in anthropological research of culture and space, two examples from recent field studies may serve as an introduction.

In place of an introduction: two ethnographic examples

Like in many other port cities, parts of the former inner city port area of Dublin have been transformed into expensive, tenant-owned apartment blocks. They form gated communities closely boarded off against the old working class neighbourhoods still inhabited by former dockworkers and considered "dangerously low class". In some streets, gated luxury apartments and community-run housing stand practically next door to each other. In the old dockworkers' area of Dublin, the level of social organization is amazingly high. Neighbourhood associations, labour unions, church run voluntary associations and not the least local pubs serve as nodes in a dense network of local ties among the "old" inhabitants. In the "new" gated apartments, there is hardly any personal contact at all. The inhabitants are usually younger, single, and working long hours in the inner city business district. But there is a neighbourhood structure emerging among them after all – taking place in the virtual space of the internet. Inhabitants of the gated communities have established several chat-rooms, in which they communicate, exchange gossip and news about their neighbourhood – often without ever meeting on a face-to-face level at all.[1]

The downtown business and shopping district of Hamburg is noted for its wide variety of luxury stores and expensive shopping malls. In this pedestrian zone, parts of the urban space are increasingly being privatised by incorporation into malls and passages. Close to the main train station, this area is also the point of arrival for a growing number of homeless people coming to Hamburg from other areas of Germany. The number of homeless people in Hamburg is estimated to exceed three thousand, and at least a hundred of them live directly in, or in the immediate vicinity of, the central business area. Frequently, their often demonstrative appropriation of urban space as a place to live, drink, socialize and to earn a livelihood by begging or selling an homeless' street magazine, has lead to conflicts with the interests of business and city administration.

As an ethnographic study on the everyday culture among homeless men in Hamburg's inner city has shown, becoming homeless is much more than just losing one's place to live. The culture of homelessness consists of a complex set of knowledge, social rules and strategies for material and emotional survival, which

has to be learned explicitly in quite a short time. Often, this cultural knowledge is taught to newcomers in form of a mentor-trainee relationship, where an experienced "old hand" teaches his strategies to a newcomer in the streets. As a recent study has shown (Kokot 2004), a significant part of this cultural knowledge is about space. Urban space is being classified into safe and unsafe places to sleep, sources of food and good places for hustling or begging. As the homeless men in Hamburg's inner city are organized in loose groups, the newcomers explicitly must learn the strict rules related to the distribution of territories, as well as to the rules of ownership and defence of good places to sleep or to beg. As a matter of fact, the urban homeless are in possession of a unique type of expert knowledge on urban space, quite different from the mainstream. Recently, this specific cultural knowledge has been used to develop a guided city walk offered by homeless people to tourists and other interested audiences. This form of "cultural translation" has become quite a public success (Kokot 2004).

Anthropology and "space" until the nineteen-eighties

It goes without saying that „the field" is no longer a spatially defined site anthropologists naïvely enter, leave or return to (Lovell 1998, Olwig/Hastrup 1997, Olwig 2004), as the notion of spatially bounded "cultures" rooted in a distinct territory has been thoroughly deconstructed. Concepts of "culture areas" have been discarded along with their background of nineteenth-century German romanticism. Nonetheless, this has not resulted in dismissing "space" from anthropological research altogether. Indeed, the opposite is true.

Since the nineteen-eighties, there has been an almost inflationary amount of publications contesting the meaning of "space" in anthropology. Roughly, the arguments fall into two categories. In the debate about "globalisation", world wide networks and new migration are seen as factors reducing the local ties of cultures and human populations. In other words, "culture" is seen as "de-localized" or "de-territorialized". Within the debate on reflexivity and constructivism, arguments have gone even further. While globalisation studies have focused on the dissolution of established links between space, culture and society, post-modernist arguments have questioned the very existence of these categories. Following Gupta and Ferguson (1997), the notion of the field itself is to be discarded as an

instrument of colonialist "othering". Nonetheless, there has also been ongoing empirical research, attempting to reunite the concepts of space and culture. I shall come back to this at the end of my overview. First, I shall briefly sketch the developments until the nineteen-eighties.

Until the onset of "globalisation studies" and post-modernist critique, "space" had more or less been taken for granted as a constant factor governing, or even determining, the set of actions, beliefs and structures anthropologists have called "culture". Until the nineteen-eighties, "space" was not a matter of theoretical debate, but became more or less implicitly equated with the physical environment in general. Consequently, as a part of "nature", "space" was juxtaposed to "culture".

More or less deterministic attempts to link cultural variation to "the environment" can be traced back to antiquity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century such models became popular again, setting the ground for theories of "national character". Within evolutionist thought, "space", in the guise of "the physical environment", was seen as a major factor determining differences in levels of cultural development.

In the early twentieth century, a more differentiated approach came to the fore. The physical environment was no longer considered as determining human culture, but rather as enabling certain forms of economic strategies and social organization. Since the nineteen-fifties, various approaches of cultural ecology provided a systematic framework for research about the relationship of culture and the environment. Cultural development and culture change were now seen as resulting from a process of adaptation of social systems to the natural environment. Although naïve conceptualisations of "adaptation", "nature" and "environment" have been debated also from within cultural ecology, the meaning of "space" as part of "the environment" remained unquestioned until much later.

Notions of a unity of space, culture and society can also be traced to the concept of "culture areas" (Kulturkreislehre), which dominated German anthropology in the early twentieth century. The idea of a mosaic of separate, more or less spatially bounded cultures, characterized by the predominance of certain cultural traits (mostly of material culture), eventually led to the development of regional sub-disciplines within anthropology.

Based on Fardon's (1990) critique of "localizing strategies", current literature

on anthropology and space almost in unisono takes up arguments against the essentialising equation of particular socio-spatial areas with cultural traits or topics. According to Appadurai (1991), spatially based anthropological concepts have turned into veritable "prisons" for regional anthropology: As he argues, there can be no more study of India without reference to Caste, no more study of Africa without reference to lineages, and no more study of Melanesia without reference to complex systems of economic exchange.

Deconstructivist approaches

Self-reflexive criticisms of anthropology's own concepts are not an invention of the present. Processes of de-colonialization, urbanisation and the emergence of new nation-states had led to a critical re-appraisal of theoretical approaches and fieldwork practice as early as the nineteen-fifties. In the eighties however, the assessment of culture – by field work – as well as the construction and reproduction by "writing culture" moved into the centre of debate. The subjective side of field work was put into focus as well as the power relations between the investigators and their "native subjects". Ethnography was criticised as the inscription of colonialist fantasies onto a reified "other". Consequently, the spatial dimensions of "the field" were also put into question.

In 1997, at least three influential publications marked the onset of the discussion about the field as location and site of anthropological research: "Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology" and "Anthropological Locations" (both edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson) and "Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object" (edited by Karen Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup). The basic tenets of these contributions can be summarized as follows: we cannot presume any primordial or "given" relationship between human societies, cultures and the space people inhabit, and cultural differences must not be localized (Schoenfelder 2000: 28).

These positions have lasting consequences not only on a theoretical, but also on a methodological level. Fieldwork does no longer limit itself to the application of standard procedures like participant observation or interviews within the boundaries of a given locality. On the other hand, if anthropologists are to take seriously their claim to understand and give voice to beliefs and practices of indi-

vidual actors on a local level, there is nothing to replace fieldwork as a method of empirical investigation. This dilemma will come into focus even more sharply after introducing the notion of "globalisation".

"Globalisation studies"

Based on her research among migrants and refugees, Liisa Malkki (1997) sharply criticises the metaphorical notion of "roots", governing anthropological studies of culture and space as well as popular discourse. The idea of a society or culture "rooted" in a given territory, she argues, gives way to picturing migrants and refuges as "uprooted", or "rootless" elements threatening the "natural" population in their given habitat. The notion of migrants, refugees or diasporas as dangerous *"vaterlandslose Gesellen"* echoes here. Malkki's critique both represents a deconstructivist (concern with taken-for-granted concepts in anthropology, as well as theoretical consequences of dealing with migration and exile on a global level.

Within anthropology, „globalisation" refers to the increasing interconnectedness and interdependency of places and people, based on different types of translocal relations and processes. For Hannerz "globalization is a matter of increasing long-distance interconnectedness, at least across national boundaries, preferably between continents as well" (ibid 1996: 17).

The rising popularity of this concept has not served to increase its analytical sharpness. Meanwhile, the term is used to refer to the financial market as well as to international tourism, mass consumption, mass migration, communication patterns and contemporary warfare, to name just a few. In anthropology, the central focus remains on world wide networks and their role as a vehicle for cultural processes, establishing connections between the local and the global. In this context, processes of "de-territorialization" have been marked as quasi inevitable consequence of globalisation (Kearney 1995, Massey 1996). Frequently, this term refers to rather vague notions of loosening ties to a local environment, as well as to the increasing interconnectedness of the local to the global, which, on the other hand, is seen as constituting a major feature of "globalisation" itself. In a vague metaphorical way, "de-territorialization" refers to the dissolution of borders, boundaries and the anthropological "field". According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 4) cultures "… are not longer fixed in places".

Again, empirical investigation provides a much more differentiated picture. Meanwhile (not least due to the global re-emergence of ethno-nationalist movements), the meaning of the local has been re-discovered in the anthropological debate. Hannerz (1996), as many others, has emphasized the importance of day-to-day interactions and face-to-face relations for the production and reproduction of "culture". Consequently, it is the local level on which global influences are filtered, transformed and incorporated into beliefs and practices. To Hannerz, the local level is the arena "in which a variety of influences come together, acted out perhaps in a unique combination, under those special conditions" (ibid1996: 27).

In his model of "global cultural flows", Appadurai (1991) has attempted to sort various global processes into five categories, which he calls techno-, -finance-, media-, ideo- and ethnoscapes. Within these "scapes", which extend far beyond regional and national boundaries, he identifies different types of actors, who, like nodes in a network, concentrate the global flows running through these ties by their cultural practice. Appadurai's "scapes" are interconnected, but there are also boundaries and fragmentations between them. An example: by selling their goods to tourists from northern Europe, Afghan refugees working as petty traders in the streets of Thessaloniki form a node in a global ethnoscape. By exchanging news and personal messages on video with their families in Afghanistan and in the diaspora, they partake in a transnational mediascape. Most of them however, seem to live quite disconnected from major capital flows forming global financescapes (Stroux 2006). In Appadurai's model, the local level is not just a site in which global processes are reflected or have effects. In the opposite: only by face-to-face interaction and by the practice of local actors global interconnectedness is being actually created.

Studies of local actors' conceptualisation and appropriation of space present even further empirical support for the enduring significance of space and locality. In urban anthropology, it has been standard procedure to investigate mental maps and other symbolic representations of the spatial environment, and to map everyday practice in relation to urban space. Maybe because such investigations are traditionally more closely related to geography or to urban planning, they seem to have gone quite unnoticed within the recent theoretical debate about the supposed disappearance of the local. But as recent field studies such as Tomforde (2006) show, conceptualisations about space may play a significant role

in the formation of global diasporic networks. Among the Hmong diaspora in Thailand and elsewhere, a spatially-defined mental model of the "Hmong Mountains" serves as a central marker of Hmong identity. The notion of being "people of the mountains" governs Hmong relations to other ethnic groups as well as their cosmological and social order. In this mental model, the mountains are both a geographical entity and a symbolic model of identity – the mountains are where the Hmong are.

Reuniting culture and space – problems of theory and research practice

In the second part of this paper, I shall leave the chronological order to discuss some systematic problems relating to "culture" and "space", as they present themselves in empirical studies of diasporas and transnational communities.

Space, culture and social practice: the notion of "cultural spatiality"

The following arguments presuppose an actor-centred theoretical approach with a distinct focus on cultural practice, as proposed by Bourdieu (1976) and others. In this model, the units of investigation are explicitly defined not as spatially-bounded groups: instead, researchers concentrate on any type of "practice" that is transmitted culturally (i.e. learned or taught to other individuals as members of a common social category).

In this notion, "space" enters into the picture on several different levels. To begin with, this approach transcends the limits of spatially bounded units of research. As urban anthropology, migration studies and diaspora research have shown, cultural knowledge and cultural practice can be transmitted among widely spread social networks crossing spatial boundaries. As the Dublin example quoted in the introduction shows, social networks sharing cultural knowledge or generating cultural practice may not necessarily exist in physical space at all.

In their volume "Kulturelle Räume – räumliche Kultur" (2003) Hauser-Schäublin and Dickhardt propose a theory of "cultural spatiality". In this paper, I shall not refer to this theory in greater detail. It may be sufficient to note that in

this theoretical context, "space" is not considered as an abstract entity or a mere "container" of human action. Instead, "space" is seen as a conceptualisation or cultural model, and both as a medium and a product of social practice. Consequently, anthropological research on culture and space asks for the meaning of spatial metaphors representing social and cosmological relations and identities as exemplified by Tomforde's study on the Hmong diaspora. It investigates the co-existence – and sometimes clashes – of differing cultural models and the power relations governing the appropriation of space as in the example of the urban homeless.

Ethnographic field work is a central feature of anthropological research. Only by closely observing and analysing individual actors, the transformation of global process into local practice can be investigated empirically. Besides systematic comparison, this particular inside view on the micro-level remains distinctive of the anthropological approach. Nonetheless, the conceptual deconstruction of the anthropological "field" cannot remain without practical consequences. If research sites are no longer spatially defined, a relational notion of the "field-as-network" has to replace the "field-as-location". Consequently, "being in the field" means being part of a shifting web of relations and, if necessary, following these relations to wherever they may spread to. In the case of diaspora research for example, the much called for "multi-sited ethnography" may take up global dimensions.

Urban space, diaspora and transnational fields

In the last decades, "diaspora" has become a major topic of ethnographic research (Kokot, Tölölyan, Alfonso 2004). Until recently, the majority of ethnographic studies have been focussing on questions of community formation and identity politics in diaspora. But while the construction of diasporic identities and the agency of elites and institutions in identity politics remain important aspects of the social organization of diaspora, they are not the only ones. Diasporas vary in their historical experience as much as in their community structure, and they may be very differently embedded in the overall system of various "host" societies.

In history as well as in recent periods of socio-economic change, certain diaspora communities appear to stand out in a particular way, playing the role of

economic and/or cultural avant-gardes by virtue of their transnational or global orientation. Certain cities, notably many major port cities, have become centres of such diasporas (Ceasarani 2002, Cesarani/Romain 2005, Mazower 2005). Although today the relations of cities and ports have changed significantly, many of these historical centres of diasporas are also still attracting the formation of new diaspora communities.

The Greek port of Thessaloniki is a prototype of a historical "diaspora city". Until the onset of World War II, it was the major centre of Sephardic Judaism in the Eastern Mediterranean. During Ottoman times, as Mazower's (2005) and other studies show, Thessaloniki's social fabric was a dense web of networks of Jews, Turks, Greeks, Armenians, European traders, Slaws, Gypsies and other Balkan peoples, all interconnecting to each other and linking the city to various types of transnational flows. Although there are only very few physical traces left, the urban space of Thessaloniki has obviously been formed by this diasporic history. Related features can be seen in other Balkan cities as well: even the relatively modern, 19th century layout of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia shows the central mosque, the great synagogue, a market hall run by the Jewish community and Orthodox Christian institutions all situated around one square in the city centre.

In studying urban diasporas, anthropology is facing a dilemma. On one hand, fieldworkers are confronted with units of research far extending the limits of observable spatial boundaries. On the other side, there are intuitively obvious relations of diaspora and (certain types of) urbanity or urban space, which need to be *systematically* investigated.

For this purpose, two working concepts may be useful in analysing these relations. Appadurai's (1991) notion of "global ethnoscapes" might be used more or less synonymously with Avtar Brah´s suggestive concept of "diaspora space" (Brah 1996). Both concepts share the underlying assumption that, despite the seemingly unbounded networks and interrelations that make up diasporas, there are certain nodes of concentration in which different types of networks (or "cultural flows" in Appadurai's terms) do interconnect. It is in these nodes where transnational practice is being created by individual actors, and at least some of them can be located in urban space. Diaspora cities then, may be considered as providing a dense web of diasporic networks with a significantly high incidence of such nodes.

Another very promising concept is Olwig's and Hastrup's (1997) notion of "cultural sites". Despite the seeming disappearance of spatial references, they argue that certain typical locations like temples or family homes play a central role in maintaining social structure, serving both as physical frame and as a focal symbol for the conceptualisation of a common identity. In diaspora cities, we then might expect a variety of such sites, serving as points of social and symbolic orientation and materially shaping the urban space. "Cultural sites" can serve as points of departure from which to follow the interrelatedness of diasporic networks.

Summary: the meaning of "space" beyond local boundaries

For the greater part of anthropology's existence as an academic discipline, "space" was only implicitly present. Considered as part of the "given" natural environment, it was seen as either determining or enabling the formation of "cultures". A strong relationship, if not equation, between spatial territory, society and culture was at least tacitly assumed. Consequently, the „field" remained unquestioned as a site and location for ethnographic investigation. These notions have changed dramatically with the onset of deconstructivist critique in the eighties and nineties. In the course of shifting anthropological fields, the justification of fieldwork itself was put into question. The local level was portrayed as losing its significance in face of transnational migration flows and globalisation.

This paper strongly argues for the enduring significance of space, and of "the local" as a site where global processes are transformed into action or are constituted by practice. Studies of diasporas and transnational networks deal with units of investigation extending far beyond local boundaries, but this does not mean that space and place have lost their meaning. Cultural models of space may even gain new significance in the context of diaspora, as the Hmong example has shown. Urban anthropologists investigate specific forms of spatial behaviour (as in the Dublin case) and expert knowledge (as in the Hamburg case). Systematic relations between certain types of urban space and the formation of transnational diaspora communities remain to be investigated.

Notes

1 Astrid Wonneberger, personal communication relating to a current research project on urban transformation processes in the Dublin Docklands area, October 2006.

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