



## **Doreen Massey: Space, Place and Politics**

*Relational thinking*

### **Professor Ash Amin**

Thank you very much for this invitation. Thanks to all the organisers for this honour and really what I consider to be a real privilege to talk about Doreen and her work at this occasion and I should also add that I like to think that I speak on behalf of many, many people, not just in this auditorium but elsewhere in world geography who would want to say something about Doreen not simply because she's influenced the thinking of so many of us over such a long time.

So let me begin with this thought that we tend to forget that a settled idea or a body of work that we've all really become quite familiar with started out as a real jolt to imagination. A real I suppose push against a door that at some point in time was firmly shut. A real break with canonical thinking at the time, whenever that time was, that this idea or this body of work that we have really become quite familiar with came from somewhere and originated in the thinking of an individual or a group of individuals, perhaps even an intellectual movement of some sort.

And so I think it is with Doreen Massey's work on space and place which transformed taken for granted assumptions some thirty years ago which showed how central the spatial is in the constitution of the social - this was not immediately obvious at the time - that turned places into richly textured and also a patterned ground. I'll explain in a minute what I mean by patterned ground. Thinking that made place come alive. Now others on this Panel and later on this afternoon will comment on other aspects of Doreen's work on space and society but what I want to do is just to concentrate on how she changed our thinking about place: cities and regions, localities, lived space in general I think. And she did so - she got to see place in a completely different way. At the tail end of the 1960's places were still seen either as bounded historical entities all with their very elaborate modes of living and usually reducible to the parochial. We understood places at that time very much by their own internal, sometimes historical, dynamic combination of the social culture and the lived. Or the then dominant traditions saw places as how can I put it as points on a geometric surface, as lifeless aggregations of numbers, the measures of spatial science, manifestations of quantitative calculus in some shape or form. Points on a grid - a very flat grid. And Doreen I think at the time was very much at the forefront of a group of radical geographers and then later Marxists and Feminists who tore into this reading, who politicised the spatial and offered a very different interpretation of place. One incidentally I should add that made you actually really want to study cities and regions as a social scientist, not just as a geographer. And in my case as a graduate in Italian Studies I came across somebody's work there on cities and regions which made me think now really I would like to know more. This is really interesting stuff. And I think she offered us three crucial insights. Looking back over this twenty-five to thirty year period, which I want to just briefly articulate one was the absolute necessity to consider cities and regions as entities - caught up in multiple dynamics of spatial formation. Many, many sources of formation and in some cases deformation so Doreen insisted that in looking at a city or a region you need to look at historical legacies. You need to look at external influences. You need to look at yes - the word "structural" has to appear in her work. Structural stroke institutional forces. You have to look at place to place connections. You have to look at local class relations and much, much more. And we take a lot of this for granted now but I think we see all of this right from her - what I consider to be a seminal essay - in what sense a regional problem which was drafted in the late 1970's we see the beginnings of this construction of place in relational historicised cosmopolitan terms. And I mean cosmopolitan there not as a dirty word but really as a way of situating place in its wider spatial context. Then I think she showed us secondly how local futures, the local present, the local future, was inextricably bound to the logics of capital and structured power. But never slavish - never slavishly so and indeed with capital itself conceived as a social relation as something that was engendered, that was class inflected, that was above all contested. And

again here we saw this from her very significant book "Special Divisions of Labour", and in her later - and including in her later writing, places such as Cornwall, Manchester, London appear as caught, as snared in and shaped by world capitalist transformations, particularly at the time in the early mid Eighties industrial transformation but again at least for me never in a one way essentials manner but always talking back. These are the places, the cities and regions that she talked about always inflecting the bigger changes afoot, sometimes disrupting the challenges of the cities and region's face.

This last word disrupting I think is an important word because a third crucial insight that Doreen Massey has brought through her work was really her invitation to see place as a political field; as an entanglement of power relations which are never reducible to the obvious sights of power and to the powerful alone. So power here and also through the work of her colleagues at the Open University power revealed as crushing, as unequal, as constitutive, as combative, as uncertain and sometimes producing unpredictable and emergent effects. And again here we see this right from her work - on work in which she refers to these key concepts, spatial geometry's of power to that on workers, unions, women, local government and democracy in general. It is absolutely clear that cities and regions have to be seen as sites of what - of never easy to read power dynamics. Never easy to read power dynamics which demand an understanding of the plural sources, the plural meanings of power on the one hand and on the other hand also demanding forensic situated analysis. Doreen has really just simply descended from above. She's actually done what she's done by looking at particular instances, social spatial. So this forensic situated analysis in order firstly to trace the networks and the relations that make places. Secondly to see the plurality of actors both here and there in dynamic interaction as co-responsible for the making of place and looking also for those sites perhaps liminal sites, through which some kind of possibility for democratic change in these cities and regions might be possible.

Now these transformations in our thinking on place, and I've just mentioned three. I could list many more but these three strike me as the ones which come with enduring legacy, I think we owe decidedly to Doreen Massey. But it's a particular kind of debt I think we owe Doreen. It's to a mode of thinking, a way of seeing in the examples that I've chosen - place - rather than the offer of a fixed theory of place with all the nuts and bolts in place. In my view her call has been to do - has been to do cities and regions in an open, sophisticated, inquisitive and above all caring way. To trace the actors, the trace the legacies, the relations and the institutions that ultimately make space. Now she gives us in my view no spatial template - template - but instead to use her own words she gives us a sense of place with some of the ingredients in place for us to develop that sense of place. Which is why - which is precisely why I think over a twenty five to thirty year period her thinking has been so influential, so formative and still so relevant. So it's curious then that - in the last couple of years a new tide of critical thinking has emerged not just on the horizon but in some of our journals, which is beginning to question relational thinking or at least calling it to account. I'm referring to some Papers in economic geography and regional studies in the last couple of years. Interestingly much of this work isn't critical of Doreen's own writing but others - people like myself - who have also engaged in developing a relational perspective. And just so that Doreen has something to respond to let me just end on a couple of things that we can all get our teeth in to as part of this critique of relational thinking. One relational thinking has been - it's been said that it's far too concerned with networks and flows and fluidity, the changeability of things if you like, than with given entities such as historic regions, firms, states, institutions. Those things that are I suppose historically visible. And so it's been argued that because of this I suppose emphasis of the changeability of things, relational thinking is criticised for being light on structural power and on embedded social and institutional forms. And another element of the critique is that relational thinking it is argued is much more interested in interpersonal and social networks than in underlying mechanisms and macro structures and therefore offers against it's own I suppose canonical principles only a very partial reading of the world at large, whatever that world is, whether it's the world of firms or cities and regions. Now in my own view I think both criticisms tend ultimately to ignore what I would call the baseline of relational thinking, which is that all social life is made out of entities, micro and macro contingent and institutionalised which are always placed in dialectical relationship with each other. In other words I think the essence of the kind of relational thinking that Doreen was trying to get us to acknowledge and acquire as part of our set of analytical tools is a question of whether you define the social

process, the socio-spatial process as entities in relation with each other or as entities that ultimately make the world of their own accord in their own right. I think that's the key issue that needs some debate and some discussion. So certainly I think from within a relational perspective my response to some of these criticisms would be well yeah - one of the challenges that we all face is precisely that of understanding, lets take a region here, of how regions relational mappings for instance it's global connections and it's global flows and the things and bodies and ideas passing through a region, actually intersect with given institutional configurations, territorial boundaries, governing structures and so on. And so just to close I would be very interested to know what Doreen makes of this recent turn at least in regional studies calling the relational approach to account.