



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

*Spatial divisions of labour*

### **Jamie Peck**

I am also thrilled to be here as a special treat to be joining the festivities but at the same time marking the contributions of I think undeniably of a fundamental maker of contemporary geography. A person who has had such a powerful affect on the field it's difficult for me at least to think of anything I know that hasn't been shaped by Doreen's work. And certainly all of my time since graduate school has been shaped in one way or another in engagement with things that she's saying. And so I think she's been a very important shaper of geography and I mean that in the broadest possible sense of the word, not just as a defender of a certain position within the academic division of labour if you like but rather in the sense of a development of a geographical stance in shaping a project within and beyond geography which has influenced many of us in the field which is simultaneously an intellectual and a political project. So I don't think any of us can really separate out those parts of it which gives geography a purpose in a sense so it's way beyond the normal questions of organisation of academic life. Now in my corner of this sort of endeavour as an economic geographer, economic geographers have become prone to ask all sorts of self-contemplative questions over recent years. We were asking ourselves what is economic geography for, analytically and normatively what is it for? If economic geography didn't exist why would we want to create it? And I think the best answers to these questions we all engage in Doreen's work and life and practice and so I'd still make the need for certain kind of economic geography shaped by the kinds of work that Doreen's been doing. And she does this very much as a public geographer as well, a public geographer who was doing those kinds of things long before the term 'public geographer' was in circulation. And pursued a kind of public geography which is built on enduring commitments, social and political engagements which are right across the board from soup to nuts as we would say rather than just selective commitments. So given the reach and the depth of Doreen's work I mean I think it's impossible to cover the entire field in the few minutes that we've got and I'm very conscious of the fact looking around the audience that we could almost randomly pick people out of the audience who could do a better of this than I but I'm just going to try and pick up two themes from Doreen's work starting off with spatial divisions of labour and the other end of the book end which I think is where Jane is going to take over with the world city book and just talk about some things that have occurred between those books separated by about a quarter of a century. Now it's become a staple observation that the spatial division of labour book marked a paradigm shift in economic geography as Ash has also just emphasised. Now economic geography has become rather prone to turns especially in the last decade or so but I think the turn or the switch or the paradigm shift that was associated with the arrival of spatial divisions of labour was the most profound one in the history of the modern discipline. Everything seemed to be changing at the time this book came out in 1984 and the old certainties of economic modernisation, the old certainties of Keynesian economics all of these were being drastically brought in to question and it was clear I think that we needed different kinds of economic geographies to cope with, explain and see beyond the world that we were living in at the time. And so in that sense I think the spatial division of labour book encapsulated a radically different approach to economic geography. It dealt with theory differently; it dealt with method differently, it dealt with politics differently and many other things. Theory in what I suppose is usually described as industrial geography before this book had largely been implicit if not inert drawing on location theories and so on and suddenly after the spatial divisions of labour book the construction of theory became a continuing and central problem in the field. And not just the imposition of a rigid framework from Marxism or elsewhere but the creative deployment of an adaptive reflexive form of theory construction and a sense that theory had to be perpetually reconstructed in the light of events in politics and so on. And I think that was liberating and demanding at the same time. I think it just opened up the questions dramatically compared to before. So it made a big impact in terms of theory. It's impact in terms of method I think was no less significant. Method was no longer just a set of

techniques to be mastered as it were and then applied but a problem space defined by politics, positional, and the challenges of different forms of grounded explanation. All of these things became part of a wider set of methodological questions with a distinction under line there where production of data is a social process about the interrogation of competing theoretical explanations and the sifting of those and so on. And politics pervaded this entire process as well, not least by virtue of the dramatic social and material costs of restructuring as they were being experienced at the time in the UK and elsewhere.

And so the restructuring project the intellectual project of restructuring built I think around this book in many ways was really organically connected to those conditions and to the politics of that time. And in that sense it's partly a collective social product itself. Maybe we can all claim a bit of the contribution to this book and it wasn't just an object of disengaged lone scholarship I suppose that's what I'm trying to say. I think it came out of a firmament. So now going back to twenty five years ago in the midst of all of this firmament I was a humble graduate student at Manchester University working lonely on my project studying Thatcherite employment policy and for us in Manchester at the time this book was our Bible. It came along a few months after I started my graduate studies and even though we realised we weren't up to emulating this kind of project I think it just emboldened us in lots of ways to strike out in different directions as economic geographers. It gave us licence we felt to explore a transformative and expansive project of economic geography released from those narrow bounds that had been that had caged it really until the 1970's. So the spatial divisions of labour book and the questions of industrial restructuring which animated it and were inspired by it dominated the field through the mid 1980's in ways that maybe today seem unthinkable. But I don't think it ever really even monopolised the terrain almost as soon as it arrived it was spawning other reactions and different developments in the field. Financial geographies spun out of one side, engagements with feminist geography spun out of other conversations and so on. So immediately it was proliferating the field. So it was an extremely exciting period I think for all of us to be a part of. So I think for what the spatial divisions of labour book did for me was to establish the foundations for relational forms of economic geography which I still can't think outside in many respects and that's completely shaped the way I think about everything and lets just call it an established mode of thinking in many ways which has been extremely productive. It also established a way of understanding the interconnections of spatial inequalities and reconstituted power relationships and many of those kinds of approaches have become if you like baked into the cake of the way in which economic geography has been practised ever since. One of the interesting questions for me though were especially as I started to teach in sociology after I moved to North America nearly ten years ago was the extent to which these spatialised arguments have travelled into the rest of the heterodox social sciences which in many respects might be potentially receptive to them but I think we've still got things to do in reaching out in some of those in some of those ways. And when I was teaching in Madison I would always have the sociology students reading this book and time and time again you could almost see the light come on. They'd not really been exposed to spatial ways of thinking before and it was almost this sort of Eureka moment – aha – I see how you do it. On the other hand Eric ...Wright a friend and colleague of mine in Wisconsin who Doreen has a long conversation with in this book and I've co talked with several times over the years still doesn't get it and I've tried mightily to try to convince Eric about spatialised forms of think and I still think he kind of operates in a very different sort of way. Extremely bright guy very much engaged with many of the same issues but this form of spatial relational thinking is not something I've been able to persuade him about. So I think there's still terrain to conquer if you like for these forms of spatialised economic thinking. So it raises for me some series of questions about what's left to do in the field of heterodox economic studies generally. It seems to me that some very interesting alliances have been struck up especially with sociology in various parts of Europe. But there's a lot left for the rest of us to do in working with economic sociologists, with comparative political economists, with the post-autistic economics, which in many respects isn't paying any attention to arguments in geography yet maybe even to the new geographical economics. I think there is an entire zone of heterodox economic studies which as yet are to have a full conversation with this kind of work.

And if this question is about the intellectual legacy of spatial divisions of labour I think there are parallel questions about the political lessons of the 1980's and the time this book arrives –

arrived. This was also a time of course when Doreen was working along with the GLC and with GLEB and some work I've been doing lately has involved me re-reading the London labour plan and a lot of those documents and what I'm really struck with reading that work again from the early 1980's was the acute self awareness of the fact that local authority powers in that context were being pushed creatively to and probably beyond their limits. The idea of local economic development strategies in many respects came out of that kind of cauldron and you saw there in the work of the GLC and the other municipal socialist authorities an attempt to position their projects strategically and symbolically against Thatcherism. They knew that the transformation of the metropolitan economy of London was beyond the reach of parts of local authority funding that were available but to develop forms of practice beyond simple protest was I think very much shaped that kind of project. It was also about stretching the very meaning of economy and thinking about economy in radically different ways: care economies, alternative economies to the defence economy and so forth. So that wasn't necessarily realistically going to transform the entire metropolitan economy of London but it did place these municipal socialist interventions in very creative tension I think with market led forms of restructuring. It established a series of demonstration projects, the ultimate outcomes of which we will never know thanks to Mrs Thatcher's interventions in the mid 1980's and the abolition of that tier of government. But they were constructed demonstration projects constructed on a really hostile terrain with a – informed by a very acute reading of that terrain. And so I wonder what are the lessons of these experiences for us today. If we look around today the global justice movement is seeking to shape a polycentric alternative to hegemonic neo-liberalism. In the world of economic geography the diverse economies project of Gibbs and Graham and many others is trying to develop new economic ontologies rooted in local practices, projects built in place. How should we think about these relationally? What configurations of extra local economic relations might be enabling of such projects? What's the terrain across which such projects are being developed? How do we harness the chicken and egg question of the relationship between alternative economic imaginaries forged at the local level and what you might call the rules of the game that shape inter local competition and so forth. And I think there's a whole series of questions we could ask in part by reflecting on that early Eighties period but in lots of other ways. What makes Utopianism and real politic do we need at the present time in the development of alternative economic visions?

So this brings me to the second book and I've got to be quick on this one. World City – just came out a year or so ago – provides some of the resources for thinking through these questions I think especially in the context of the present crisis and Doreen's work has always been addressed to the most urgent questions. I think it's fairly obvious what the most urgent questions are now so in the minute I've got left I'll just turn briefly to those contemporary questions of the current economic crisis. One of the chapters in this book is called "Who owes whom?" which in many respects is probably the most important question of the present time. Who owes whom in the current global crisis? Now the system of financialised capitalism which is analysed so acutely in World City has encountered a moment of unambiguous crisis. What are we to make of this? The dominant narrative is one of collapse and desperate efforts to resuscitate the credit system to restore growth at almost any cost. But there is a palpable sense I think anyway of that we are flying blind in this process compared to the early Eighties where there were struggles over quite acutely articulated alternative visions of the economy at the present time the people in control of the levers of power don't seem to have a blind idea about what they're doing. And so I think we are in a very different sort of terrain at the moment and I think we are in need of alternative economic visions in a much more urgent way in many respects than even in the early 1980's.

So much of the discussion on the Left I think isn't getting us very far at the moment in squaring up to the challenges of the present crisis. Eric Hobsbawm and Naomi Klein for example are talking about the this is the equivalent to a Berlin Wall moment. And I can see the appeal of that metaphor. It's a tempting one to use but I want to suggest that surely it's entirely wrong. It's based on entirely the wrong spatial imaginary of the present time. The Berlin Wall notion implies the binary separation of alternative systems or worlds. The complete failure of one system being followed by the colonisation by the other. Now I don't think that's an apt metaphor for the present time although again I can see the temptation of using it. Neoliberal Globalism is not a singular and totalling system. It's not likely to collapse

like a house of cards in one big explosive moment even if the ideology is largely bankrupt now; even if Chicago's core hubris won't be what it has been in the past. I think we need to be just as worried about the work of technocrats and so on that are busily re-engineering the system and we need to be just as worried about embedded practices of neoliberal governance and so on. The other question about the Berlin Wall that metaphor I would say what's on the other side of the wall today – which I think is one of the most sobering questions. Certainly we are not looking at a situation where a pre-organised aggressively expansive alternative is waiting on the other side of the Wall as it was in 1989. We are in a different historical and ideological moment.

So the question that World City poses which is the one that I will end on is what are the global responsibilities of places like London and you might add New York? I mean isn't that one of the most important questions to be asking at the present time? It seems to be to be viscerally urgent. And beyond localised efforts to reform and reboot the system what new forms of international and interurban relations can we anticipate in the wake of this crisis which surely is going to be a period of unprecedented restructuring. Not just a very bad recession followed by a recovery of a similar system. We are looking at a process of restructuring. And how do we head off all of the near term threats to progressive alternative economic visions that are out there – the dull compulsion of competitive relations intensified by desperate attempts to reclaim market shares, beggar thy neighbour strategies on the resurgent intensified inequalities and so on. So progressive projects will certainly need their beachheads in this hostile environment but they can't surely just be enclaves. We've got to figure out ways in which a progressive sense of inter-local relations can be constructed. So if ever there was an urgent need for an outward looking, progressive sense of place I would argue today is that. Letting the financial technocrats of London and New York redesign the system is the last thing we should be doing at the present time. But this has to go way beyond I think the populist attacks on fat cat salary packages and so on to problematise the social form of restructuring itself and the relationships between places as well as within them.

Now these are questions for the rest of us. If there is meaning to the term of Doreen retiring maybe it's now our turn to ask these questions, and give her a break from them for a while. I think they are questions for all of us at the present time. But Doreen's work directs us, I think, to the right places to look for answers which of course will be stakes and sights of struggle in the coming years. In the heat of the present crisis above all we need a sense of perspective and I think Doreen's work always gives us this. It shows how we can use history and geography critically and dialectically as a means of opening up forward looking and outward looking perspectives and I think that's what we urgently need at the present time.