



Doreen Massey: Space, Place and Politics

London and the politics of place

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Now I think I am the only person involved today who is lucky enough to be supervised by Doreen and John funnily enough for my PhD rather a long time ago and in the spirit of today they helped to turn what was going to be very straightforward geographical comparison about worker's organisation in two different places, looking at the kinds of traditions rooted in place in to something which was much more systematic with a sensitivity to the non-local as well. Now hopefully these will come up to kind of wake everybody up a bit. I've got a few pictures because this of course is classic Doreen and this echoes through what Ash and Jamie have been talking about and at that time which was the early 1990's we developed an argument that the two English towns I was looking at each had a very particular forms of local organisations so this argument was not to detract at all from the specificity of place. What was really going on in these places, what made workers think the ways that they did; what was the history of those places, the traditions of the workplace, the labour process and so on. But interestingly they both niggled me over the years to make sure that these traditions were understood in dialectical relationship with the non-local as well and that became a big theme of the work. Obviously the workers themselves were employed by transnational companies even though they worked in one place they were linked through the relations of capital. They lived in the same nation so they were engaged in the same political conversation forms of citizenship and so on. But interestingly I found that workers moved and brought their traditions with them so they translated traditions from one place to another. They brought organising ideas with them as they moved. And they were also influenced by what I call demonstration effects, the way in which ideas in one place travel across space. So workers might see other groups of workers organising in particular ways, developing new strategies and then try them out themselves. And this is the global justice movement I think has shown this very clearly in recent times how things can be translated across place and space but in so doing they are transformed and they are reincorporated into those places. So this for me was very exciting and it turned what as I said was probably very dull and rather ill conceived project into something, which was much more exciting.

Now recently I've been engaging with Doreen's work about the politics of place and as Jamie said this book, *World City*, has been very, very helpful to me. Thinking about what makes places what they are and if we really take that seriously what does that mean for the kinds of politics we should practice? And that sounds like a very simple idea but it's actually a very complicated idea particularly in today's world where all the interconnections and traffic and flows between places are so much deeper and more extensive at the same time. So really I've been grappling with the question of politics – politics with a big P, the kind of official politics. How does this stuff affect big politics but also how does it affect little politics organising, resisting, trying to do all the things that Jamie was talking about at the end there about creating a new kind of place. And I've been thinking about these things in relation to London. As I say suing this book, much more than I ever thought I would when I bought it. I always love Doreen's work. It's incredibly accessible. There's loads of ideas. But this has been incredibly useful to thinking through the kind of concrete things I've been grappling with. And I've been working with colleagues at Queen Mary on a project we've called *Global Cities at Work*, and this is about the role of migrant workers in low wage jobs in London so you can see why this book is very useful. We've interviewed about four hundred workers and we've looked at their migration histories, their conditions of work and their links back home. And in many ways we can't do this stuff, the kind of empirical interviewing story-gathering collection of information without thinking about London at the same time because these people are making London what it is. They are making the city work. And they are doing so through their connections to the rest of the world.

Now Doreen's arguments have been incredibly helpful because what she's argued is we can't understand London without thinking about those connections, not just now but historically. But at the same time we have to take it a stage further and think how London's been complicit in the development of a particular kind of global political economy in the last thirty years which we now call neo-liberalism not least thanks to Jamie on my left and this neo-liberalism has had huge implications for London itself but also for the rest of the world. So on the one hand it's stimulated all the changes in London's economy, which we associated now with the crisis financialisation. And from my point of view sub-contracting – the kind of privatisation outsourcing of particularly low wage jobs and all the migrant workers we've interviewed are embedded in a sub-contracted employment relationship. It's also fuelled polarisation in the economy and massive inequality in London. On the other hand as well it's exported this model of capitalism to the rest of the world so we see increased market penetration, those very sub-contracted employment relationships developing in export processing zones all over the world. Growing inequality and increase in the desire to migrate, the need to migrate and the desire to migrate – that then brings home neo-liberalism back to London as workers are increasingly moving to a city like ours, filling the low paid jobs that have been so degraded that locals who can claim benefits and find other ways of surviving don't want to do them. And so with colleagues we've been talking about London having a migrant division of labour. And I think we couldn't have come at this formulation without using this book and Doreen's ideas. So just to give you a flavour of this, sorry so to give you a flavour of this extraordinary diversity that now exists in our city this was one cleaning contract we looked at in one building at Canary Wharf. There were a hundred and five workers and amongst those hundred and five workers we found twenty different - twenty-nine different countries of origin, one of which was the UK, so twenty-eight outside Britain. This is just one contract. So you have incredibly multinational workforces in buildings like those Towers at Canary Wharf. These are the people cleaning the building, mostly at night, but also in the daytime there's another international workforce coming in to do all the financial jobs that Jamie was talking about. So our question then, and Doreen's question is what kind of politics makes sense in dealing with this kind of world and that as I said earlier is actually a harder question than you might think.

So at the end of World City Doreen tries to raise some of these questions about what would a concrete politics in London look like if it took it's geographical responsibilities seriously and she talks about Ghanaian workers recruited to support the NHS, climate change, how London's involvement in climate change could be something that was dealt with locally as well as thinking non-locally. The question of tax justice which the Guardian has had lots of stuff on recently it's been incredibly powerful; all about how the people in the city of London making all their profits, exporting their model of neo-liberalism, are not paying taxes and are using other geographical spaces to avoid paying tax in offshore tax havens and so on. And she's got some fabulous stuff about oil and the economy of oil, which again is traded in London. So in many ways what we're doing is looking at the city and the injustice on which the city itself depends. And of course my migrant workers project is part of this story. Workers are working here and they are remitting so that people can support families and so on back home. Now many of these workers have been involved in the London living wage campaign that... oh I've lost a slide... this is supported by an organisation called London Citizens which is a broad based coalition of different organisations faith, labour, educational organisations like our own department, various schools. Interestingly forging relationships and solidarity across difference in the city so the stuff Doreen talks about multiplicity, the spaces about multiplicity, being in place is a key part of the story. So the coalition tries to forge links across difference within London and it's always been focused on trying to improve the terms and conditions of work. Interestingly it was supported by Ken Livingstone who should be here later, and that's been then taken up by Boris Johnson. Now since the campaign started in 2001 it's involved about five thousand workers and re-distributed about twenty million pounds back into the pockets of low wage Londoners. Now that is a drop in the ocean in terms of the numbers of workers on low wages in London but what's interesting is that it's improved wages and conditions in London it's a very local politics but in so doing because the workers are migrants it's increased the amount of money they are able to remit back home so it has implications for the rest of the world. Now I think this is Doreen's politics in action. More controversially perhaps is what the campaign seeks to do is to improve job quality and that in the long term if we really thought about making bad jobs better jobs and improving job quality, might we then reduce the demand for migrants in the first place. Migrant workers are here

doing those jobs because they're not jobs that local people want to do unless they have to do them. So at the minimum the campaign has been about increasing respect for workers and the jobs that they do; linking that interestingly to political rights because a lot of these workers are not able to exercise rights unless they have political rights and citizenship and there is a regularisation campaign going on at the same time. But at the maximum level I think this campaign is part of a much bigger network of engagements where people are trying to enforce responsibility. The corporate social responsibility movement, the global justice movement, they're all really trying to call the powerful to account for themselves, to enforce responsibility, so thereby change the very nature of global capitalism itself. And in many ways maybe picking up Jamie's point we could think of London here being a pioneer of a different kind of export, a different kind of model of the economy and a more sustainable way of living, something that is part of a bigger movement to enforce responsibility. So we have a lot to thank Doreen for. The way in which she is developing sophisticated academic ideas but they're always practical, they're always grounded, they're always things you can use and she's always been willing to understand the world but also try to change it and I think that's something we should cherish and celebrate today.