



Doreen Massey: Space, Place and Politics

Doreen's response to the panel

Doreen Massey

It's great to see so many friends here and a really lovely occasion. Thanks and thank you very much to all three speakers and there's no way I'm going to be able to respond to all the ideas that they've thrown up and anyhow you will probably soon be sick of hearing us lot up here on the stage speaking. I'll just pick up though on one or two of the points that were made, maybe almost to tell you why I started thinking in certain kinds of ways. I mean this issue of relational thinking which has been mentioned by all three speakers in which looking I mean it's always embarrassing – Stuart Hall said this in a thing he did about his own work just recently – it's embarrassing when you read your earlier work to find actually over thirty years you've always been saying pretty much the same thing. You've been hammering away at it, coming at it from here, coming at it from there, but there is this essential message which you have never been able to drop you know. It's like a dog worrying away at a bone. And I think relational thinking has been a bit like that for me and it started in a whole host of ways when it was to do with spatial divisions of labour you know I still am – I've lived down here – down here – I've lived in London and the South East for over half of my life and yet still somehow I am a Northerner and spatial divisions of labour came from much out of being a Northerner in a sense because the regional problem as it was called, which meant us, The North, was always seen as a kind of geographical pattern. We had more unemployment. We had less skilled workers. We had lower incomes. And I wanted to get away from thinking of it just as a pattern like that. So there was a problem up there that we had to solve and to think how the differences across the country were related to each other and the way in which I did that was to say those patterns – well I tried to argue that we should do – was to say those things that just look like patterns on a map are the product of the underlying relations of production stretched over space. So the managers are in London, the production workers are in the North, the research workers are in Berkshire or wherever it is; that they aren't just things that you map on to space. Linking them are relations of power, linking them are the social relations that structure the space of this society and those inequalities. So we can't think – and this needs saying even more today - we can't think about the success of the South East or of the First World without thinking of the poverty elsewhere. They are intimately linked. So it was trying to think relationally in that way. Thinking relationally about place, crept up on me in a different way and I think it really hit me in the period around 1989 when there was so much vile and violent defence of the specificity of place. You remember the period of ethnic cleansing when with the breakdown of Yugoslavia; the breakdown of the Soviet Union, so many nationalism's, parochialism's, localisms rose to the surface that had been buried for so long in various ways. And place became associated in the kind of daily media politics with a desire to exclude those who didn't belong. It became associated with a defensive nationalism, with a kind of fortress notion of exclusivity and of ownership. And for me as a geographer that was an absolute disaster really because I hated that politics, that kind of fortress notion of place was absolutely the opposite of everything I meant and yet on the other hand I did not and still do not want to let go of a deep love of the specificity of place; that feeling of knowing where you are and why it is so and of all those long histories and trajectories that meet up there that make it so and make it specific. And so that setting about to rethink place is something produced relationally; that is produced by relations and connections and things that have happened all around the world to create the specificity of this local place was a way of being able to say yes, it's particular, yes it's specific but it's not an enclosure, it is not fortress Europe, it is not little English nationalism; it is not Serbia which only belongs to the Serbs. It was to try and hold on to specificity and be an internationalist. And I think I mean one of the things that might be said at that point was – I think it was Jamie who talked about how there tides of change are going on. I mean I don't think I knew at the time but that was very much at the same time as feminists were arguing about the relational construction of woman. We were having the same arguments about sexuality, about in the antiracist campaign about the notion of race. So there was a whole within cultural studies and sociology

too a whole movement of relational thinking and relational thinking about space and place in a sense fitted in with that wider, intellectual – just re-thinking that we were all trying to do in various political ways in various political struggles which were – which had their expression within the academy. And I think that what seemed to happen for me to the argument about place – and I wrote an article called *The Global Sense of Place* - which kind of said all little local places are actually the product of wide international relations. You can't think about England without thinking about the Empire etc, etc. All very obvious now that the local is the product of the global. And in a sense I became - it's hard to know how you recognise these things but I gradually recognised that was only one half of the picture and we were actually becoming almost internally self obsessed by looking inside places. We all knew that places are hybrid now and we kept on saying that places are hybrid and they're not coherent and they are open to the outside. But it was always about the global within the local. And the kind of thing that Jane was talking about - about the outward looking-ness of place was response to that. But to say a place is relationally constructed doesn't just mean that it is internally a product of all those wider relations, it also means that we must look out to those wider relations and ask about our responsibilities towards them. So that brilliant map of the single contract that Jamie put up we might ask about the effects in those places where all those dots were of the migration of those migrants to London I mean the example if give in *World City* and there are people here in the audience that have worked on this far more than me but is a professional workers from the global south, without whom this richest of cities in the global world could not exist, who come here to help it continue. It is that there are closed health centres in West Africa, education systems on their last legs in the global south because professional workers have come here. The social reproduction of London could not happen without that so as well as glorifying quite rightly the freedom to migrate and the fact of the multicultural nature of London one aspect – one effect of looking outwards as well is to say what is the effect of that on those other places. So that was what I was trying to get at precisely by outward looking-ness. And we have a story of it right now which is being thrown at us on the news every day and that is the global financial crisis is global and it was made in the USA. Basically it is saying it's not our fault. Well, it's certainly global in the sense that the global crisis - global financial crisis - has repercussions across the globe it's also made in the USA just because the approximate cause of it was the collapse of the sub-prime market in the USA but it could have been many other things. But make no mistake about it the pre-conditions, culturally, economically in whole ways of thinking about financial deregulation they were set up here in this country, in the United Kingdom, in London, in the 1980's in the financial city. Remember the Big Bang and all those things. It's not just that local places are produced by the global but the form of the global is also produced in local places and that's kind of trying to reverse that thinking in order to make us think and what does our local place stand for. What can we as people inevitably and necessarily embedded in local places do to take responsibility for –at least to recognise and then to take responsibility for those wider relations within which we live out our daily lives. So that's one – that's how relationality in a sense happened for me. Just a couple of other points on things that were made. Territorial versus relational – Ash said there's a kind of resurgence of the territorial back against the relational. I think it's a false problem and it's partly set up because things almost inevitably get set into two camps. You know on the one hand there's the space of places and on the other hand there's a space of flows and you have to agree with one or the other. When I kind of set about imploding the notion of fortress space – place in that way, I absolutely did not want to get rid of the notion of place in itself at all. I wanted to hang on to it. What I wanted to do was reconceptualise it. And it seems to me there is no contradiction from a relational point of view between thinking relationally and utterly acknowledging the existence of entities whether they be nations or places or all kinds of things. The point is we must re-think them away from being isolated boxes with borders around that aren't themselves produced through their inter-relations into thinking them as precisely products of as Ash called it their co-production. So it isn't an argument between territory and relationally. It's an argument about the relational rethinking of the territorial to acknowledge precisely that interdependence I think.

I don't want to go on but on the dissent into the micro, I think that happened. It's true that a lot of relational work now is about tiny little, the ways managers relate to each other within firms and stuff like that and I have to say it's not my thing. I think what happened was the argument about relationally got tied, happened at the same time as we were all rejecting grand

narratives and there was this kind of desire not to assume big pictures. The grand narrative of progress or modernity or of modes of production or whatever and so we went down into – some did – into those looking at each of the little local relations, exchanges, practices, that it took to make up those grand narratives and refused to think about them. Now I think that's a problem. I absolutely don't. I don't mind if other people go down to the micro level but I don't want to in that way because it does miss out the big story. It does make it very difficult to pick out the real big relations – real big structuring relations of power and I think we should avoid that. And a big story is not the same as a grand narrative. In a grand narrative you already know the end. You know the direction; you know what's going to happen. In the end it will be progress, globalisation, communism, whichever grand narrative you happen to be standing in. In a big story all you know is that there are big things happening in the world like there are now indeed. You don't know the end. It's not something which gives you a template through which already given you can interpret every single thing that happens. But it does enable you to stand at a level which is much bigger than the level of all those micro interactions which I think people are getting so involved in now.

I am just going to say one thing about the book ends and the conjunctures because I think this afternoon- later – we will talk a bit more about the current conjuncture. *Spatial Divisions of Labour* was actually written before the assumption of dominance by finance. It was written at the end of what we call the Fordist Period when capital, industry, was trying to get out of a crisis by extending geographically by pushing off it's production into cheaper areas and so forth. It didn't take into account therefore that earlier conjuncture of the 1980's. *World City* did. For me the 1980's was the crucial decade of change at that point. It was at that point when there were all those battles in the GLC that we were part of and which we shall undoubtedly come back to later this afternoon. It was at that point that finance established it's dominance, both globally and within this country. And I'm just thinking about this geographically. I think it was also a point at which a small part of London came to establish a new – not brand new but a newly sharpened dominance over the rest of the country and that has had massive effects over the intervening thirty years. And it was almost a moral geography as some people call it. The values – I remember a picture and some of you will too of Margaret Thatcher in a black coat I think she had – wandering dolefully across a piece of waste ground I think in the North East of England. And the whole message – she was pictured at a slight distance - and the whole message was she was thinking how can I bring the values of the London and the South East to these benighted lands where mines are closing, have been closed, and steelworks are closing and so forth. And there was very much an attempt to establish the kind of the values of the South East over the rest of the country. What is happening now is that those values themselves are in utter disarray. I mean you can hear metaphorically those voices in the north "I knew those yuppies would come to no good". There's a huge geography behind this and maybe this afternoon we can talk about it some more. But we were told stories about the necessary geographies of this country during that period which we must challenge. They were challengeable then but with the complete implosion of the system that's happened in the last couple of years we absolutely must continue to challenge them now and maybe we can talk about that a bit more this afternoon.