



Doreen Massey: Space, Place and Politics

The relationship between economics and society

Michael Rustin

Well it's a great pleasure and honour to be here also very enjoyable to be in this palatial establishment which is quite different from the haunts of sociologists as a rule. There is no such thing as a Royal sociological society although I must say I did think this idea of moving the cloakroom half way through was carrying an obsession with the particularities of space a bit too far. I found myself wondering this morning about in the earlier session about why it was that in some ways geography has done better than my discipline, sociology, in capturing the essence of the changes of recent years and has in some ways I think surpassed in the enthusiasm and commitment that arises from it's students and people interested in it what used to be the case for sociology. And I do have – I do have one or two thoughts about that but which I think may centre on this question of relationally, which we might come back to.

But let me get on with the main remarks I've prepared which I hope are not too obviously. Doreen has always been as we know a politically committed and active person as well as an eminent geographer and indeed she's never seen these two fields of work as being distinct from one another. She's always brought geographical perspectives into her political writing and activity and political perspectives in to her geography. Indeed I see from the very first issue of Soundings that we co-edited with Stuart in the first article that she published under her own name in the journal the title was "Making Spaces – Geography is Political Too". I've worked closely with her since 1995 when she, Stuart and I founded Soundings although we had a brief period together on New Left Review between 1991 and 1992 which ended not altogether happily and we then started Soundings and it occurred to me also that part of the difference between the Soundings project and the new Left Review Project related to what Doreen had to say about grand narratives and I think our collective loss of enthusiasm for a particular grand narrative as exhaustive of political possibility. So we've worked together on Soundings ever since even though we are no longer the principal editors. It's a mark of Doreen's strong commitments and loyalties to what she believes in but she's remained fully involved in this project in all these years as well as doing all the other things that she does. Now her concept for the magazine was that it would encompass the widest possible conception of the political. We are and were a post for this project, trying to make sense of a world in which the class settlement of the welfare state had in Britain at least broken down. We described in our opening editorial that we wanted to bring the whole of society in to political discussion. Civil society we said but meaning by this much more than the market economy which liberal economists have tended to equate with civil society. Since we felt that the established political structures dominated by the political parties as they were excluded much of life and society from the political process. This was a project of radical democracy; this commitment of Doreen's is the same that has led her to work for the Open University, the most democratic of our university institutions for so many years. Doreen helped to make this very wide frame of political definition a reality in the journal. She invited numbers of scientists, especially from the Open University to write for it believing that scientific innovation was at the core of many social changes and she also encouraged an interest in visual communication as a form of political and social discourse, especially through publishing photography in the journal. She also brought two particular theoretical focuses of interests to the project, each of them as we've been hearing, connected to the other. One was concerned with cities, and especially London and the inequalities between cities and regions in Britain of which she has always been keenly aware being as we've heard being strongly identified with her Manchester roots. And the other is globalisation and its consequences which has been one of the areas of debate in which Soundings has done much of its best work. She's always been a strong opponent of market led or neo liberal globalisation. She's described its damaging effects on the underdeveloped and developing world. She herself having maintained particularly strong links over many years with Latin America in particular, Nicaragua, Mexico and most intensely and of late Venezuela. She's engaged herself in her links with these places in her continuing

struggle with neo imperialism of which she sees globalisation I think as an instrument. She's also described in her book about London World City the damaging effects of globalisation and Britain's particular contribution to this through the financial domination of its economy on London itself and Britain more widely. A financially dominated economy generates inequalities both by region and class, she has persuasively argued. The relations of production of the financial sector are quite different from those of other forms of production, generating more inequalities and less social responsibility among its controllers and those in power than almost any other. She would like to see a much diverse economic landscape with co-operative forms of production, a commitment to use values and the involvement of relatively excluded communities, including women, in productive economic life. And when she worked with Ken here at the GLC and in GLEB she tried to give practical effect to these commitments as indeed she does in her work in Latin America.

Now I think I've always had a bit more time for the globalising process and even the role of markets within it than Doreen has. That's to say it seems to me that some credit does should be given to this global order for the fact that it has at last seen some substantial economic development in large countries such as China, India and Brazil. And also in the world development indices in regard to such dimensions as infant mortality rates, life expectancy and education, which have, shown some significant improvement in most continents with a significant exceptions of much of Africa. But be that as it may, and we might want to discuss it, the fact is that this system, which Doreen described in World City in 2007 at the very zenith of its power has just imploded; it must be said without much of a contribution to its collapse from it's political opponents like us. It seems to have fallen apart entirely through its own contradictions and agency. But this now opens up a whole new political territory for us. What is to happen next? It does not look as if the status quo... is likely to be restored any time soon and certainly neither Doreen nor I nor I think probably any people in the room would want it to be. Now this is in principle not just a matter of the hegemony of the financial system, the financial sector, but the whole ethos of our economy and society. Governments have long defined as their primary task this includes I regret to say New Labour, their primary task to ensure high rates of economic growth in order that individuals should be able to exercise freedom of choice to pursue their ends in the market place. This for quasi neo liberal governments like ours is largely what a good society means. They don't have much else by language of aspirations. Doreen has never thought much of increased levels of material consumption as the main goal of life and would want to see a rather conception of social value and there are now of course also pressing environmental reasons for this as well as intrinsic questions of what makes life meaningful.

So the question is can we find ways of thinking about the future at this major point of crises and change which will help to bring to the fore more egalitarian democratic and relationship based questions of well being. Now Doreen seems not to have anticipated this crisis, the implosion, any more than the rest of us did except perhaps in the most general terms of recognising general un-sustainability when she saw it. But here we are in this crisis which may therefore be an opportunity to rethink the future. It occurred to me I had quite a shock listening to the earlier discussion and realising I had never really quite taken in that the central idea of the geography which Doreen and many of you practice is relational geography. And the reason that this is a shock to me because I realise that the relational is in a way the focus of interest of other areas of my work and also the work of Sounding in particular in the area of psychoanalysis that I'm involved with and which Sounding has been involved with which defines itself as object relation psychoanalysis and which means by this the idea of the innate and essential connectedness of individuals from the moment of birth, with others other persons described in this strange terminology as objects you know both conscious and unconscious and within that frame of reference the definition of well being in schools or in healthcare or in social services or in the work place is about the quality of human relationships. If there aren't good human relationships based on care and understanding nothing very good will happen. Well that is a relational conception and might think that is a relational conception, which defines a conception of the social good, somewhat different from that of possessive individualism. And I must say I'm quite struck to discover that the primary centre as it were of conceptually of what Doreen has been doing in relation to geography has never quite become the primary definition of even Soundings as a political project in terms of the kind of social value, the social world that we would want to see constructed. So from that

point of view I've – I've learned a lot about how we might try to consider some alternative political imaginary. Well I'm sure Doreen will be an active and creative participant in this new debate about what next and it may be that she and even we could today begin to explore some of the possibilities that this situation may now be bringing in to being.