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Introduction: Place and

Gender

The place of gender

How is gender linked to geography? Do men and women live different lives in different parts of the world? And if gendered attributes are socially constructed, then how does femininity and masculinity vary over time and space? What range of variation is there in the social relations between women and men? Are men usually centre-stage and women confined to the margins in all societies? What have geographers had to say about these issues?

These are the sorts of questions I want to examine in this book. They are issues that seem to have become important in a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, where there has been a remarkable flowering in recent years of discussions and debates conducted in pre-eminently, geographical terms. In all sorts of disciplines, scholars are writing about migration and travel, borders and boundaries, place and non-place in a literal and metaphorical sense. These debates reflect the huge disruptions and transformations in the links between specific peoples and particular places that have taken place in recent decades. Vast migrations of people and of money – labour and capital in the more abstract language of the social sciences – are a consequence of the increasingly global scale of those sets of social relations and connections that tie places together in the modern world. And these migrations have displaced and disrupted the lives of millions of people. Nationalist movements, wars, famines, as well as the development of transnational capital and global corporations have resulted in the enforced movement of many peoples, while hundreds of thousands of others have voluntarily, and usually temporarily, set off across vast geographic distances, travelling for pleasure and to broaden the mind.

Both types of movement have radically changed the relationships be-

tween individual and group identity, everyday life, and territory or place. It is becoming commonplace for increasing numbers of people to leave 'home': some to settle and make their lives far from where they were born, too many others to become 'placeless', 'dis-placed' peoples of the world, condemned to the limbo of not belonging, whether to a nation with a national territorial base, to a class or to a region. For many of the women involved in these journeys, movement has been associated with proletarianization, as local and multinational capital draws them in increasing numbers into the waged labour forces of the new international division of labour. The global reach of capital means that women in Korea, Kampuchea and Katmandu may end up working for the same corporation as women in Western Europe.

For some of these women, their travel may not involve vast geographical movement; it may involve only local travel or indeed no physical travel at all. Instead, the displacement experienced is the result of changing economic, social and cultural circumstances, as women enter factories or the homes of the elite as domestic workers, and as they are connected to other times and places through the penetration and cultural dominance of Western forms of information technology and popular culture. Whether the movement is physical or not, it is almost always associated with the renegotiation of gender divisions. These renegotiations are the subject of the chapters that follow.

Before turning to the ways in which these changes have been theorized and investigated at a whole range of spatial scales and at different sites in the home, the workplace and in public places, I want to look at how these huge material changes have affected our understanding of the links between place and identity.

Space, place and 'the local'

It is often assumed that the net result of the increasing scale of global interconnections and movement is a decline in the significance of 'the local' – in the amount of time people spend in a restricted geographical area, in the number of friends and family in the environs, and in the control that might be exercised at the local level, whether over political decisions and actions or the economic consequences of the actions of capital. The corollary is assumed to be the end of a sense of local attachment, of belonging to a place with all its local idiosyncrasies and cultural forms. While some of the former features are certainly apparent for some people for some of the time in certain parts of the world – most notably, of course, for affluent Western males – for many people in the world, everyday life

continues to take place within a restricted locale. Even for the most mobile – an international financier is perhaps the most extreme example – a large part of daily activities, both at work and at home, must inevitably be within a finite area. The global money trader may be moving money around the world at a fantastic speed, but he himself (and it usually is a he) is sitting in front of a screen in Hong Kong, London, New York or some other financial centre, and in the evening, more often than not, these traders presumably go home to somewhere within daily travelling distance of their office, rather than to the international airport to jet off to another part of the world.

While the 'localization' of most of everyday life is indisputable, a perhaps more interesting question to ask is how have the enormous changes of the twentieth century impacted on the notion and existence of a 'sense of place'? Do people any longer feel a part of and a responsibility to their local area? And has the loss of stability, or perhaps more accurately the immobility, that once rooted peoples to a particular place for the whole of their lifetime and for generations of the same families meant the decline of locally based customs and practices, of those local mores that created the particularity of one place and distinguished it from others?

While these are perhaps particularly anxious questions for anthropologists whose whole disciplinary *raison d'être* has been to investigate the distinctiveness of 'other' local ways of life and the differences from their own (Okely 1996; Olwig and Hastrup 1997), geographers too have felt some anxiety about the consequences of modernity, the growing dominance of global forms of capitalism and the assumed loss of belonging to a local place. Empirical evidence, however, has assuaged this anxiety, as there are many signs of a continued, and even intensified, sense of locality in many parts of the world. These signs vary from the revival of local customs, practices and languages, in more or less acceptable forms, to the appalling effects of ethnic nationalism and widespread poverty and deprivation that trap growing numbers in their place. Further, as growing numbers of geographers and anthropologists recognize, the consequence of all those changes summed up under the term globalization is not that the world is becoming one, reducing local differences, but rather that 'difference, diversity is generated not from the integrity and authenticity of the local community, rooted in tradition, resisting and accommodating a modern world system ever more powerful in its force, but paradoxically from the very conditions of globalising change themselves' (Marcus: 1994: 42).

One positive effect, however, of the anxiety about the meaning of place, and the understanding that globalizing forces reconstruct rather than destroy localities, has been a shift towards a more sophisticated conceptualization of the notion of locality or place itself. The commonsense

geographical notion of a place as a set of coordinates on a map that fix a defined and bounded piece of territory has been challenged. Geographers now argue that places are contested, fluid and uncertain. It is socio-spatial practices that define places and these practices result in overlapping and intersecting places with multiple and changing boundaries, constituted and maintained by social relations of power and exclusion (Massey 1991; Smith 1993). Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience.

As Smith has recognized, 'the making of place implies the production of [geographical] scale in so far as places are made different from each other.' Scale, therefore, is 'the criteria of difference not so much between places as between different *kinds* of places' (Smith 1993: 99, original emphasis). Thus 'it is geographical scale that defines the boundaries and bounds the identities, around which control is exerted and contested' (p. 101). In this sense, as the socio-spatial definition of difference between different *kinds* of places, scale has recently been adopted in a number of geographic texts about difference as a central organizing device. In our reader *Space, Gender, Knowledge*, Jo Sharp and I used scale as the organizer (McDowell and Sharp 1997), as did David Bell and Gill Valentine in their book about food, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (1997). I adopt the same strategy here.

But defining places, distinguishing the difference between them by scale, does not imply that they are constituted by processes that operate at a single spatial scale. Thus a home, or a neighbourhood, is a locality that is bounded by scale – that is rules/power relations that keep others out – but its constitution is through the intersection of a range of factors that may coincide there but are not restricted to the local level in their operation. As Doreen Massey (1991) has argued, localities are produced by the intersection of global and local processes – social relations that operate at a range of spatial scales. 'This produces what she terms a 'global sense of place'. Places may no longer be 'authentic' and 'rooted in tradition' as Marcus suggested in the quotation above; they are instead defined by the socio-spatial relations that intersect there and give a place its distinctive character.

So in Kilburn, the example used by Massey in her paper, the peculiar or particular sense of place that is experienced by her and other local inhabitants is defined by, among other things, the combination of in-migration from Ireland and Pakistan, by the 'Chinese' chip shop that sells curry and baked potatoes as well as noodles, by an internationally owned clothing firm employing local women who may have moved to Kilburn from Cyprus, Southern Africa and the Indian subcontinent to finish garments for a high street chain store. The 'authenticity' of places in contemporary global

cities like London, therefore, is made up from flows and movements, from intersecting social relations rather than stability and rootedness. And even though a locality in inner London may seem an extreme example of the globality (globalness? globalization?) They are all horrid words but capture what I mean) of local places, at the end of the twentieth century there are few 'untouched' places.

Anthropologists, too, have come to a similar understanding of place. Thus Judith Okely, an anthropologist interested in the changing nature of place or localities in Britain and elsewhere, has recognized the relational nature of place and also noted that places are defined, maintained and altered through the impact of unequal power relations. She has argued that 'different groups inhabiting the same spaces can create and shift boundaries by subtle means' (Okely 1996: 3) and, of course, by less subtle means such as force or legal exclusion. New nations in Central and Eastern Europe are defined by excluding 'others' – Bosnians from Macedonia, for example. And at a smaller spatial scale, the nationalist and 'Loyalist' spaces in Ulster's cities are another extreme example of places defined by exclusion. In other places, different people do live together, but distance between them may occur. Social distance does not always imply geographical distance, and occupants of the same Cartesian spaces may live in very different 'places'. Further what have been termed relational places – locales constructed through social relations between groups and individuals – slip up and down the spatial scale as it were, as particular sets of social practices connect the local to the regional, or to the national and the global in different ways for different inhabitants.

This new sense of place and scale might perhaps be imagined diagrammatically as a double helix rather than an old-fashioned three-tier cake plate which maintains spatial separation. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, albeit discussing the body rather than place, has used a rather similar image – the Möbius strip, rather than a double helix – that also captures this sense of interconnection and change. It is important, however, not to be too carried away by the fluidity of this new conceptualization and representation of relational place, as customs and institutional structures clearly persist through time and 'set' places in time and space as it were. But rapid change is also possible, as the dramatic events in Central and Eastern Europe made clear when the map of this part of the world was redrawn between 1989 and 1991. Perhaps there are relatively established and stable regimes of places, or socio-spatial associations, which persist through time but which are then overturned and replaced in a period of crisis.

This notion of a regime to refer to a relatively stable set of social relations that are maintained despite minor alterations and variations, but which are subject to periodic upheavals, often in times of crisis which may be related

in particular to economic changes, is also a useful way to think about gender relations. In the next section of this introduction, I shall look at this argument in more detail. Before I do so, however, I want to briefly mention the argument of a French anthropologist, Marc Augé (1996), who has suggested that the extreme result of the sorts of changes we have experienced in capitalist societies is the replacement of places by non-places.

Non-places are those locations in the contemporary world where the transactions and interactions that take place are between anonymous individuals, often stripped of all symbols of social identity other than an identification number: a pin number for a cash card for example, or a passport number. Indeed cash points and airports are classic examples of non-places, according to Augé, where each of us interacts as an anonymous individual with a technological object or an official or employee who is not interested in us as a person but merely as a number or a statistic, an anonymized flow-through. In these spaces, our individual social attributes and our membership of a social group become irrelevant: as long as we have the money, of course, to make the cash transaction or purchase the ticket to travel. In non-places therefore, gendered attributes and perhaps even our sexed bodies become unimportant, opening up a paradoxical space of control and liberation. Although we might be able to escape our sets of personal connections and obligations momentarily or for a few hours, these transactions are also carefully monitored and controlled and our movements are subjected to various forms of electronic surveillance.

Augé's arguments are interesting, however, as they have parallels with the freedom and surveillance of cyberspace. As we surf the net, our bodily attributes become irrelevant, or rather, fluid and alterable at will. There is nothing to stop us entering the chat rooms of cyberspace in any form we like. The only limitation is our imagination, which, of course, tends to remain tethered to the limited subject positions available in 'real' space. But unless and until the exchange of views on the net becomes materialized, the gendered attributes that define us as feminine or masculine in other forms of interaction do not matter. Let's move on, then, to explore the material aspects of gender and gender relations, but keep in mind the idea of 'place' as the grounded intersections of a whole variety of flows and interactions that operate over a range of spatial scales: I shall return to this conceptualization of place at the end of the chapter.

Defining gender

If the conceptualization of place has become more nuanced in recent geographical work, then so too has the definition of gender. The focus of