

Big Ideas in Social Science: An Interview with Doreen Massey on Space

David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton, in conversation with Doreen Massey (2013)

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*The late Doreen Massey was emeritus professor of geography at London's Open University. Her books include *Spatial Divisions of Labour, Space, Place and Gender, For Space, and World City*. She focuses on space, place, regional inequality, globalization, and cities. Most recently, she was co-author and editor, with Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin, of *The Kilburn Manifesto*. Her interview took place in January 2013; she died in March 2016.*

David Edmonds: Doreen Massey has made her reputation by studying space. Not outer space — space here on planet Earth. Massey is a geographer who wants us to rethink many of our assumptions about space, including the assumption that it is simply something we pass through. She believes that an analysis of spatial relations — between, for example, people, cities, jobs — is key to an understanding of politics and power.

Nigel Warburton: The topic we're focusing on is space. Some people might think that that's a topic for physicists or architects; why is it a topic for geographers?

Doreen Massey: If history is about time, geography is about space. What I do in geography is not space meaning outer space, or space meaning atomic space. It is space as that dimension of the world in which we live. Whereas historians concentrate on the temporal dimension, how things change over time, what geographers concentrate on is the way in which things are arranged — we would often say geographically; I say, over space.

Warburton: And in your own work about space what do you focus on?

Massey: One of the things that motivated me was anger. I got really annoyed with the rest of the social sciences, and indeed with philosophers, paying so much attention to time, so that space became a residual dimension: it's always "time," and "space." Time is the dimension of change, of dynamism, of the life we live, and all the rest of it. Space became the dimension that wasn't all of that. A lot of us, implicitly, think of space as a kind of flat surface out there — we "cross space." And space is therefore devoid of temporality: it is without time, it is without dynamism, it is a flat, inert given. Foucault wrote in the later part of his life that we often think of space like that, and that was wrong. And I agree with Foucault about this. A lot of what I've been trying to do over my all-too-many years when writing about space is to bring space alive, to dynamize it, and to make it relevant, to emphasize how important space is in the lives in which we live, and in the organization of the societies in which we live. Most obviously I would say that space is not a flat surface across which we walk. Raymond Williams discussed this. When you're taking a train across the landscape, you're not traveling across a dead, flat, surface that is space. You're cutting across a myriad of ongoing stories. Instead of space being a flat surface, it's more like a pincushion of a million stories. If you stop at any point in that journey, there will be a story. Williams spoke about looking out of a train window and there was this woman clearing the grate. He speeds on and forever in his mind she's stuck in that moment. But actually, of course, that woman is in the middle of doing something; it's a story. Maybe she's going away tomorrow to see her sister, but before she goes she

really must clean that grate out because she's been meaning to do it for ages. So I want to see space as a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any one moment. Space and time become intimately connected.

Warburton: If space isn't just an empty stage, if it's somehow inhabited and imbued with all kinds of stories and memories and events, how can you study it?

Massey: There are a million ways to answer that! But one way is to say that it raises some of the most acute questions. If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things existing at the same time: of simultaneity. It's the dimension of multiplicity. We're sitting here, and it's around midday in London. Well, at this moment it is already night in the Far East; my friends in Latin America are just stirring and thinking about getting up. Space is the dimension that cuts across all those stories; the dimension of our simultaneity, of multiplicity. What that means is that space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of "the other." It presents me with the existence of those friends in Latin America. It is space that presents us with the question of the social. And it presents us with the most fundamental of political questions, which is, how are we going to live together?

Warburton: So you're saying that space isn't about physical locality so much as relations between human beings?

Massey: Exactly. We don't think of time as being material. Time is thought of as ethereal, virtual, without materiality. Whereas space is thought of as material: it is the land out there. But there's a dimension of space that is equally abstract — just a dimension. That's the way in which I want to think about it. Space concerns our relations with each other and, in fact, social space, I would say, is a product of our relations with each other, our connections with each other. Globalization, for instance, is a new geography constructed out of the relations we have with each other across the globe. And the most important issue that that raises, if we are really thinking socially, is that all those relations are going to be filled with power. So what we have is a geography which is the geography of power. The distribution of those relations mirrors the power relations within our society.

Warburton: Could you give an example?

Massey: Look at the city in which we're sitting, London. The power relations that run from the City Square Mile and from Canary Wharf around the rest of the world are extraordinary. London is a key node within the financial globalization that has taken place over the last 30 years — part of the dominance of finance within the organization of the global economy. Some of the most powerful institutions are here, and it was also here that a lot of the neo-liberal economics, within which we now live, was imagined in the first place. And London has been part of the export of that way of thinking around the world. So its power is more than economic, it's also political and ideological.

Warburton: You've given a description of power relations in the city, but how is that political?

Massey: There are a number of ways in which that way of looking at globalization can lead you into asking political questions — which is what I want to do. It enables you to map power relations. I'm not against power — power is the ability to do things. What I think we should be critical of in the social sciences is the unequal distribution of power: the power of some groups over others, the power of some places over others. I am very critical of the role of the City of London in its domination of economies and economic ideologies in the rest of the world. So, one way into this topic is through an empirical, descriptive examination which identifies that the power in our globalized world is too unequally distributed. But there's another way. This relates back to how we think about space. The way in which we look at globalization at the moment turns space into time.

For instance, in our terminology we are a “developed” country; the countries “behind us” are “developing”; and then you’ve also got “underdeveloped” countries. Now what that does is to convert contemporaneous differences between countries into a single linear history. It’s saying that that country over there — let’s say Argentina, a “developing” country — isn’t a country at the same moment, which is different. Rather, it’s a country which is following our historical path to become a “developed” country like ours. So we are denying the simultaneity, the multiplicity of space, that I want to insist on, and turning all those differences into a single historical trajectory. Now that has a lot of political repercussions. The most important one is that it assumes that there is only one future, and that’s being a “developed” country. Argentina must follow the way we are going. Well, as it happens, Argentina right now does not want to follow the way we are going. There are a lot of alternative voices in Latin America that are saying: “We don’t want to be ‘developed’ like you. We want a different model, which is more egalitarian, more communitarian, and so forth.” But that way of turning space into time, turning geography into history, is a way of denying the possibility of doing something different. If we take space seriously as the dimension of multiplicity then it opens up politics to the possibility of alternatives.

Warburton: So you’re trying to encourage a Gestalt shift by describing the world in a particular way, to reveal a different way of understanding the same phenomena?

Massey: Absolutely. If we took space seriously as a dimension that we create through our power relations, and as a dimension which presents us with the multiplicity of the world, and refused to align all stories into one story of development, then we would reimagine the world in a different way. We are presented with different political questions. I think it opens up our minds!

Warburton: You’ve criticized the categorization of “developing” countries and “underdeveloped” countries and the implication that there is only one trajectory toward the system that we have in the west. What can you do to persuade those who believe in that trajectory? How can you convince somebody in the grip of that ideology that they’re wrong?

Massey: People get trapped in their imaginations: that’s a common problem. So it’s a question of challenging common sense. The hegemonic common sense at the moment includes the notion that we are stuck with this. And I hope that my arguments about space will help us break out of this feeling that we can’t do anything about it. I do little things: I talk all over the place, I write, I go to and work in countries that are trying to do something different.

Warburton: Is the problem that each society wants to project its version of reality onto the rest of the world?

Massey: Well, I don’t want to attribute nefarious intentions to people. I would say two things. One is that that way of thinking — “one road” if you like — is characteristic of modernism and modernity generally, on both left and right of the political spectrum. There is one thing called “development,” there is one thing called “progress”: it’s what’s been called “grand narratives.” This was a feature of some versions of Marxism too: from feudalism we would go to capitalism, to socialism, and then to communism. But this idea of a grand narrative is also highly political and very much a product of power relations. There is no doubt that the leaders of the Western world and the banks in the city want the rest of the world to follow and to be dominated by their model of the world. The United States and the United Kingdom are involved in trying to force other countries into what they call democracy, which usually means market societies. So there’s both an overall zeitgeist, the grand narrative, which is a hundred years old and which we have criticized a lot in the social sciences. And there is a particular political dimension in which the powerful want to dragoon the rest into following their path.

Warburton: Are there other ways in which space and politics link together?

Massey: There are loads of ways. For instance, do you remember Occupy London, that group of tents? I got a little bit involved in that. I gave a couple of lectures in the university tent. What struck me was how spatial their politics were. For one thing there was a huddle — a very unpretentious low huddle of tents between vast stone edifices of God and Mammon on each side. The very unpretentiousness of those tents was an affront to the pretentiousness of St. Paul's and the London Stock Exchange. The very physicality of those tents raised an impertinent finger to the complacent spaces of the establishment and neo-liberalism. There was something really symbolic about the very placing of the thing itself and its material form. And even though it was so tiny, I think that's the reason it had to go. In its very presence it was posing questions that were too deep to ask.

Warburton: Occupy even by its name was about space. The movement occupied space.

Massey: That's right. What they did was to create a new kind of space. One of the things that neo-liberalism — if one can use that awful word — has done to our cities is to privatize a lot of what was once public space. That's one thing those in the Occupy movement, and others too, have complained about. They tried to set up the camp outside the Stock Exchange. They were told they couldn't because that square is private space — although you would not know from looking at it. The place where they eventually set up their camps was public space in the sense that it wasn't private. People passed through every day, and so on. But that's public space in a very loose sense of the word "public." What fascinated me about Occupy was that they were able to create public space in a more meaningful sense. They created a space in which people didn't just pass by each other on the way to work or the shops. They talked, they conversed, they argued. While I was there people who had nothing to do with the occupation came up to me and talked and asked questions. It seemed to me that what Occupy managed briefly to create was a real public space, a place for the creation of a public, of politically engaged subjects, of people who would talk to each other about the wider world. We need a lot more of this kind of space, a space that brings us together to talk and to argue about the kind of future world we want.

Warburton: Do you think geography as a subject can be a catalyst for this kind of development?

Massey: I think it can. A greater appreciation of geography and why it matters, and why in the end space is utterly political, is very important. Look at this country at the moment: There's a huge divide between the north and south. OK, everybody knows that. I argue that that matters, it changes the society in which we live: There are different cultures between north and south, different politics. What's more, it makes the inequality between different people in this country even worse. People who own properties in the south are making money hand over fist, just through the rise in property prices, far more than they are making from their jobs. My friends in Liverpool and Manchester aren't making that money. So the very division between north and south is increasing the inequality between us. Geography matters. Or again, think about gender. The history of the division between private spaces and public places has been crucial in the history of gender difference between men and women, and the confinement for centuries of women to private space, while men are the public figures in the public space.

Warburton: Geography is usually thought of as one of the social sciences: Do you think of yourself as a social scientist?

Massey: I do. In fact a lot of my life has been spent trying to urge the social sciences to take geography more seriously. Geography is a very multi-disciplinary discipline. We engage a lot with sociologists and economists. But one of the things that I like most about geography is that it also

includes people who are natural scientists: people who study rivers and mountain formation and the Antarctic. I think within geography there is the possibility of bringing together the social and the natural sciences more than we have historically done. There are vast differences between them, and the process is very hard, but we need to do this. In an age in which we face environmental problems, climate change, pollution, problems which are utterly social too, I think that the natural and the social sciences need to talk to each other more. And geography is one of the places that this could happen — and one of the reasons that I love the discipline.