

Globalisation: what does it mean for geography?

Doreen Massey explores the role of geography in expanding both our knowledge and our imagination, and helping us to understand and take responsibility for the geographical relations that make us what we are.

Let me begin, with two occasions which provoke geographical reflection: The first concerns governments in the UK and USA (and lots more besides) who tell us that 'globalisation' is inevitable. (They really mean globalisation in its current form – which is to say 'neoliberal'.) They tell us it is the only possible future. If you point to Nicaragua, Mali and Moçambique, which do not yet seem to be part of this future, they will tell you that such countries are just 'behind', that eventually they will follow along the path along which we have led. Perhaps my favourite version of this came in 1998 when Bill Clinton reflected that we can no more resist the current forces of globalisation than we can resist the force of gravity. We might note in passing that this comes from a man who spends his life flying about in aeroplanes and thus quite effectively resisting the force of gravity. But more seriously, of course, globalisation is *not* a force of nature. It is a product of society – a political and economic project which requires the mighty efforts of the World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund, United States of America, Multi-national corporations, World Bank, etc., to push it forward. The aim of Clinton's statement is to persuade us that there is no alternative. This is not a description of the world as it is, so much as an image in which the world is being made. One of the things going on in Clinton's statement is a kind of sleight of hand in terms of how we think about space and time.

When we ask about Moçambique and the answer is that that country is just 'backward' there is a denial of Moçambique's *difference* from us – or at least a reduction of that difference merely to the fact that Moçambique is 'behind' us in development. Coexisting difference is reduced to place in the historical queue. Effectively this is turning geography into history – space into time. The implication is that there is only one history; we're just all at different stages in it. We are not to imagine such other places as having their own trajectories, their own particular histories and – and this is the point – the potential for their own futures. (What if Moçambique does not *want* to follow us?) This is saying that they are merely at an earlier stage in the one and only narrative it is possible to tell.

For me one of the most significant things about 'space' is that it is the dimension of the co-existence of others. The

fact that *right now* other stories are going on: right now green beans are being grown for our table, people are hiding in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Clinton's is a 'geographical imagination' with no real geography in it. *Really* thinking spatially means looking out beyond ourselves; a recognition of others. Clinton's (and others') is a failure of geographical imagination.

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The second concerns those who argue most strongly for 'free trade' as though there were some self-evident right to global mobility – the term 'free' immediately implying something good, something to be aimed at. This is a geographical imagination of a world without borders. Yet come a debate on international migration and the same people will often have recourse to another geographical imagination altogether – equally powerful, equally – apparently – incontrovertible – yet in total contradiction. This is the imagination of defensible place, of the rights of local people to their own local places, of a world divided by difference and the smack of firm boundaries. It is a geographical imagination of nationalisms.

Two apparently self-evident truths, two completely different geographical imaginations, are called upon in turn. No matter that they contradict each other, because it works. And so in this era of the 'globalisation' of capital, we have people risking their lives in the Channel Tunnel and boats full of people going down in the Mediterranean. Part of what makes this possible is a duplicitous manipulation of geographical imaginations.

One of the reasons, for me, that 'geography' as a discipline is so inspiring is that it ranges so widely. Through the social, the cultural and the economic; and through human and physical geography. The problem this can lead to is that it may be seen as some kind of glorified general knowledge. I have to confess to a complicated response to this characterisation. I am in favour of 'general knowledge', in the sense of a broad awareness of the world. It is an important element in the fulfilment of human potential. On the other hand I want to assert that geography is *more* than general knowledge. It has its own distinctive intellectual contribution to make to an understanding of the world. The two opening reflections were meant to indicate something of this. The spatial turn in social science research provides

abundant evidence. I'd like to spend the rest of this brief article exploring two other examples. They concern issues on which I am working at the moment, which are set within the wider theme of globalisation, and which illustrate the distinctive contribution geography can make to the debate about what it might mean to live, and to be a 'citizen', in these times.

First, we have, as geographers, in the context of the changed landscape of globalisation, re-worked one of our central concepts: *place*. No longer do we think of place – or region, or nation – as simply bounded territories with 'external' 'essential' characteristics which somehow grow out of the soil. Rather we (or many of us) now lay stress on understanding the identity of place as the product also of its relations with elsewhere. We know we cannot understand the character of any place without setting it in the context of its relations with the world beyond. This is place as meeting place: different stories coming together and, to one degree or another, becoming entangled. This is the thrown-togetherness of physical proximity. And it is even more marked in an age of globalisation. 'A global sense of place.'

This is the specifically geographical version of the more general social scientific argument about 'the relational construction of identity'. Moreover, it implies that places (as meeting places) are internally complicated. They are not simply coherent 'communities'. Rather than focussing on 'local communities', this view emphasises that places *need to be negotiated*. And yet, in government policy responses to urban poverty, we hear invocations of 'the local community' in a completely unquestioned way. Either such a community is assumed to be there, or – if it is lacking – it must be made.

A number of geographers are now trying to use our work on place to get some messages across. First, that there is *no* unproblematic place-based local community. Second – what is more – that the *creation* of such a community should not even be the aim. We want to emphasise a notion of place as one of the arenas where people (of all ages) learn to negotiate with other – to learn to form this thing called society. It is a practice of daily negotiation which we could understand as the beginnings of democracy. In a way it's incredible that places – most places – 'work' as well as they do. When they break down we should not try to force upon them an old notion of coherence. Because a healthy democracy requires not pacification into conformity, but an open recognition of difference and an ability to negotiate it with mutual respect.

In my own work on this notion, which I have termed 'the responsibility of place', I also emphasise the grave inequality in this demand for responsibility, and how space is used/is part of the production of that inequality. The negotiation of place is a far greater challenge in Oldham or the Isle of Dogs than it is in, say, Alderley Edge or Chelsea. So the grotesqueness of the inequalities in this requirement for negotiation must be emphasised; but all 'places' demand

negotiation. This recognition of the internal complexity of place, then, relates directly to debates about citizenship. As Ash Amin has written: 'This is a politics of active citizenship and it is not reducible to a politics of community'. This is a message coming from geographers; it is a message which specifically concerns spatiality, and thus the specific intellectual contribution of geography; and it is a crucial one.

The second area I wish to discuss is the GA's position statement. The statement on the purpose of geographical education identifies as one of its aims the development of 'an ability and willingness to take positive action both locally and globally' (GA, 1999, p. 57). And it is with some thoughts about that, and with a focus on the global, that I want to conclude.

John Berger writer, artist, political progressive, has written that – in these days – 'it is space rather than time that hides consequences from us'. In other words, how difficult it is in our daily lives to remember the wider relations through which the green beans arrive on our plate. Can we, as geographers, play some part in grappling with this?

Let me take up again this question of 'local place'. So often, when we talk about 'local place', we also use terms like real, everyday, lived; such words hang in the air, reverberate, evoke 'place' as somehow especially meaningful. Lots of 'intellectuals' would back that up with high-sounding propositions. Edward Casey has written that: 'To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in' (1996). Arif Dirlik likewise argues: 'The struggle for place in the concrete is a struggle against power and the hegemony of abstractions' (1998) And Carter, Donald and Squires (1993) write that 'Place is space to which meaning has been attached'. Indeed we probably all make such associations at one time or another.

But I think it is quite dangerous. If place really *is* a meeting place then 'the lived reality of our daily lives' is far from being localised – in its connections, its sources and resources, and in its repercussions, that 'daily life' spreads much wider. Where would we draw the line around 'the grounded reality of the everyday'? That's one question 'thinking geographically' might throw up. But there's another. If we imagine place as the meaningful side of space, that implies that 'space', the 'global', the wider world, is in contrast somehow abstract: *not* real and lived; *not* meaningful.

Yet a lot of our work – as geographical researchers and teachers – is concerned to demonstrate precisely the opposite: to track the routes by which the green beans arrive on your plate; to trace in great detail (to give just one example) the commodity chains through which our lives are sustained. What we are showing when we research and teach such things is not that local places are *not* grounded, real, etc., but that global spaces *are so too*. If we really imagine 'local places' relationally – as meeting places – then those relations may go around the world. In that sense 'the global'

is just as 'real' and 'grounded', even just as 'everyday', as is the so-called local place.

Now I believe that argument to be important both generally in an ethical and political sense and in relation to the GA's statement of geography's purpose. For we have, in society at large, a very particular geography of how we think about care and responsibility. It's a kind of nested, Russian-doll, geography. First there is home and family, then perhaps locality, then nation, and so on outwards. There is a kind of accepted understanding that we care first for and have our first responsibilities towards those nearest in.

Yet in an age of globalisation, and in the light of the way of imagining space and place that I have been talking about, could we not open up that set of nested boxes? Could we not consider a different geography of care and responsibility? We might think of it as an ethics, a politics, of connectivity rather than of nested territories. Specifically we could open up *the question of (the possibility of) responsibility and care at a distance*.

In a world as unequal as this one, and where the whole planet is, in one way or another, implicated in the daily lives of each of us, this is a question which *has* to be addressed. There are many reasons for that Russian-doll geography which dominates at the moment. There is the still-remaining impact – in this world said to be increasingly virtual – of material, physical, proximity (place). There are all the rhetorics of territory – of nation and of family – through which we are daily urged to construct our maps of loyalty. There is a perhaps obsessive focus – when thinking of care and responsibility – on parent-child relationships. But there are also those notions of the local as more real than the global, of place as more real than space. And this is where 'geography' can make a specific contribution to the debate.

In *Globalising Care* Fiona Robinson (1996) explicitly draws on the work of geographers in order to address these issues. It argues that in order to think about duties and responsibilities we have to imagine the world in terms of social relations. It argues, too, that abstract appeals to a shared humanity will not be an adequate motivation – that what is needed is a practical understanding of the relations which connect us.

Or again, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd (1999), two important contemporary philosophers, have argued in relation to our *historical* responsibilities that we have to take responsibility for the past because it is out of that past that we have been produced. The case which they are considering is modern day Australia's responsibility for the historical treatment of aboriginal people and culture. They write: 'we are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are' –

in other words because that past has made us (it's that relational construction of identity again). And the geographers' reply (my reply) should be: can't we argue that same case for geography too? That we should take responsibility for the *geographical* as well as the historical relations that make us what we are. After all, we eat those green beans.

That of course would be a far greater challenge. But what seems to be widely agreed is that crucial *both* to the recognition of that challenge *and* to the motivation to take it up is the nature and capacity of our imaginations. So Gatens and Lloyd write that imagination crucially involves an active awareness of others. I would extend that observation to argue that the geographies of our imaginations are a crucial aspect of that proposition. Indeed Richard Rorty – another eminent philosopher of our day – has written that:

Intellectual and moral progress is not a matter of getting closer to the True or the Good or the Right ... It is an increase in imaginative power ... moral progress consists in an increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. (Rorty 1999)

And – reflecting back on the GA's position statement – the specifically geographical aspect of that 'imaginative power' – in its potential richness and also in its intellectual rigour – is absolutely central to such progress. If, as John Berger argues, it *is* space that currently hides things from us then it is part of our responsibility and our contribution as teachers of geography to expand both our knowledge and our imaginations to make that less so.

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