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A Homesick World?

Introduction

The current era, it is often claimed, is one of big transformations. Though the processes commonly associated with ‘globalization’ are not new, the mobility of goods, information and people has never been so noticeable. This mobility is ‘profoundly transforming our apprehension of the world: it is provoking a new experience or orientation and disorientation, new senses of placed and placeless identity’ (Morley and Robins, 1995, p. 121).

For many sociologists and anthropologists alike, modernity implies mobility: ‘Exile, emigration, banishment, labor migrancy, tourism, urbanization and counter-urbanization are the central motifs of modern culture, while being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the most fitting metaphors for the journeying modern consciousness’ (Rapport and Dawson, 1998, p. 23). Rapport and Dawson emphasize that ‘the image of socio-cultural “places” rests on a conceptualization of time and space that, it is widely held, contemporary movement in the world now overwhelms and relativizes’ (1998, p. 5). With John Berger (1984), they wonder if ‘migration can more and more be portrayed as the quintessential experience of the age....Movement has become fundamental to modern identity, and an experience of non-place (beyond “territory” and “society”) an essential component of everyday life’ (Rapport and Dawson, 1998, pp. 5–6).

Many of our era’s leading sociologists (Bauman, 1998a, 1998b; Beck, 2000; Calhoun, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Hannerz, 1996; Harvey,
1989; Urry, 2000), and in particular Castells (1996), have made movement (‘flow’) a pivotal concept in their understanding of the modern world. All claim that the increase in mobility has changed the meaning of place and space. Several positions can be identified in this debate, ranging from the total relativization of the meaning of places in our mobile era to its very opposite, that local places have grown more important due to globalization (‘glocalization’, Robertson, 1995). In the latter view, geographical mobility does not relativize the importance of either place or place attachment, but reinforces both.

The debate at first glance may appear of little (or merely academic) interest and unnecessarily polarized. But in what follows, I try to explain the importance of this discussion and why so many sociologists are correctly concerned (and thus fight) over the meaning of place and place attachment. Some sociologists (generally mesmerized by the changes) argue that the old categories no longer suffice: Ulrich Beck even wants to discard notions like class since they have become ‘zombie categories’ in the globalized world (2002). Others, like David Harvey (2000), who tend to be more negative about these changes, stick to neo-Marxist explanations to make sense of them. Here, instead of passing normative judgment, I propose that we first try to better understand what the recent changes in ‘place’ and ‘space’ mean and what they imply for our lives, for our feelings of home.

The universalists: places without particular meaning

Let’s begin with what I label the universalist position, which relativizes the meaning of specific places. It is aptly summarized by Gustafson: ‘Today, social scientists are often somewhat skeptical about the importance of place and space attachment, as people seem to be increasingly mobile, and their social relations and other everyday practices are increasingly disembedded from physical locations’ (2001, p. 668). Castells, famous for his claim that we are witnessing ‘the historical emergence of the space of flows, superseding the meaning of the space of places’ (1989, p. 348), argues: ‘The fundamental fact is that social meaning evaporates from places, and therefore from society, and becomes diluted and diffused in the reconstructed logic of a space of flows whose profile, origin, and ultimate purposes