*The Review of Regional Studies* 2002, 32(1), 9-17

**FELLOW'S ADDRESS**

# Where is the Place in Space?

*Thomas G. Johnson**

## I. INTRODUCTION

First, let me thank you all very much for the great honor you have bestowed upon me by naming me the 2002 Southern Regional Science Association Fellow. There is not another professional organization that has meant more to me, or given me more than has the SRSA. And I have never derived more pleasure or more angst in preparing a paper than I have in preparing this address. It is only occasions like this that allow one the latitude really to express one's strongest held convictions but also to expose these convictions to the scrutiny of peers.

I have titled this address, "Where is the Place in Space?" In this address, I want to explore a topic that I believe is just below the surface in many of our papers and presentations, but is only occasionally exposed for significant scholarly debate. That topic is *place*. My goal is to convince you that there is much more to the concept of *place* than is captured by the concept of *space* and to challenge our discipline to find a more prominent and explicit place for it in our theory and empirical work.

## II. PLACE IN OUR VALUES

The emergence of regional science almost 50 years ago was due to the growing recognition of space as an important and fruitful area of scholarship. Yet, a number of writers have observed the competition between space and other perspectives (such as time and sectors) for our scholarly attention (Kort 2001; Ashby 1986). In particular, several presidential and Fellow's addresses have recounted this history (Ashby 1986; Cartwright 1989; Hite 1985; Isserman 1993).

Lowell Ashby, in his 1986 address to this Association, explored the struggle between what he called place and process in the social sciences. I believe that Ashby (1986) used place to denote what I am referring to here as place and space. He quotes Dickson (1976, p. 354) as follows: "Economists and Sociologists despise concern with places. They are concerned with process and abstract generalizations." Process refers to economic behavior that is independent of place and many other contexts. Concern with place, in this view, is equated with lack of generality—with idiosyncrasy. In this view, theory should not be corrupted by the inclusion of atheoretical elements. Ashby (1986) then goes on to describe the contemporaneous criticism that geographers interested in regional science were receiving for developing theories of place. He sums up this irony as follows: "Some geographers

*The author is the Frank Miller Professor of Agricultural Economics and Professor in the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri—Columbia. The author wishes to thank Bonnie Brennen, John Bryden, Kate O'Dubhchair, and Jim Scott for their insightful comments and suggestions.

have been criticized for being too process oriented and wandering into the limbo of regional science. At the same time some economists have been criticized for not being sufficiently process oriented and wandering into the same limbo" (Ashby 1986, p. 1).

Ashby (1986) concludes with the assessment that, "we may still be lacking in both place orientation as viewed by some geographers, and in process orientation as viewed by some economists. But it increasingly it appears that we have been playing in the right ball park—the one which provides the competitive context of life-enhancing insight and innovation" (p. 5).

Similar recognitions of the importance of place have occurred in other disciplines. In anthropology and ethnography, for example, Wesley Kort (2001) dates this change at about the same time that it was occurring in economics and geography, the middle of the twentieth century. He attributes the change to these disciplines' disillusionment with simplistic historical treatments of culture. Without a spatial context, history is not much more than a "record of violence, oppression and terror." A *place* and *space* context potentially provides a deeper understanding of the history. Ethnographers such as Kort go on to point out our tendency to introduce a spiritual element when we take a place-perspective. Spiritual, as used here, includes, but certainly is not limited to, religion. Whereas history is profane, places may be sacred. A variety of other writers, including psychologists such as Gallagher (1993) and cultural geographers such as Tuan (1981), apply the term "sacred" to place. Anthropologists, while maintaining that it is culture that is the fundamental determinant of behavior, see place as a pivotal context and determinant of culture.

Ten years ago, my good friend Bill Schaffer (1993), in his Fellow's Address, described one of his sacred places. As you will recall, Bill's address recounted a visit to his "home place" in Mechanicsville, Jasper County, Georgia. He concluded by asking, "What are we to do to help our places?" (Schaffer 1993, p. 216). Bill has always had a tendency and a skill for getting to the heart of the matter. The question he asked was not what do we do to help regions or even places, but "our places." Bill recalled how he had left Mechanicsville, "...thinking that I could go away, become educated, return, and make a difference" (Schaffer 1993, p. 215). I think many of us share that motivation and that feeling that we never came back.

I came from a very different place—a new place even by North American standards, one of the last frontiers. In 1920, most European-Canadian residents of Saskatchewan were immigrants. My father was of the first generation of European-Canadians of significant numbers to be born in western Canada. Despite this newness of the place, my roots are deep in that place.

The novelist and environmentalist Wallace Stegner wrote that he had a "tyrannous sense of place" (1994, p. ix). Stegner, a contemporary of my grandfather and fellow pioneer in southern Saskatchewan about 1914, wrote that people are created by the place they inhabit as a child. I believe this. Stegner writes:

> I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds

> of scenery and weather and people and humor I respond to, the prejudices I wear like dishonorable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from middle-aged sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by the little womb-village and the lovely, lonely, exposed prairie of the homestead. However anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as in the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught (1962, p. 23).

The anthropologist Raymond Williams (1989) also believes that a person's birthplace determines much about the person. Writing in his historical novel *People of the Black Mountains*, set in the border country between England and Wales, he says, "Press your fingers close on this lichened sandstone. With this stone and this grass, with this red earth, this place was received and made and remade. Its generations are distinct but all suddenly present" (1989, p. 2).

But I agree with others that we are shaped throughout our lives by places and, as importantly, the people in places. Robert Hamma (1999) suggests that "...we must remind ourselves of the power of place. Place triggers memories of the past, it impels us to act in the present, and it spurs us to hope for the future... day by day the ordinary places of our lives leave their mark on us. They become part of us and we become part of them."

From the perspective of economists, geographers, and sociologists, places determine our behavior. My argument here is that place is different from space, or region, or distance, or the other concepts that have not exclusively, but largely, defined regional science and make it the discipline that we love. I also argue that place is, or should be, as important to regional economists and our theories as it is to geographers, ethnographers, anthropologists, novelists, and musicians. Yet most of our theories and empirical work try to explain economic behavior in terms of space and distance but not of place. I think we fear place because of its lack of generality. But I think it is possible and very desirable to have a generalized theory of place. But first let me try to articulate the difference between a concern for space and a concern for place.

## III. THEORIES OF PLACE VERSUS THEORIES OF SPACE

Spatial theories deal with the location of activities relative to other activities and to spatially defined characteristics. The theories of Von Thunen, Christaller, Ricardo, Weber, and others all predict spatial patterns of land use and economic activities. In most of these theories, space is assumed to be featureless and undifferentiated except by the land uses being explained. The places in these theories are indistinct and undifferentiated. Even growth pole, agglomeration,

and related theories predict the concentration of economic activities in space without describing place in any real sense except as a product of historical accident.

More sophisticated spatial theories allow space itself to be differentiated and punctuated by spatial characteristics. Other theories allow residents to express different demands for spatial characteristics, such as amenities and costs of living (Rasmussen, Fournier, and Charity 1989). Krum (1983), for example, estimates a model in which migration decisions are determined by both family differences and differences in amenities between the origin and destination places. The models of land use developed by Alonso (1964), Muth (1969), and Mills (1972) and recently extended by Cho (2001) allow for individually unique demands for place-based amenities, commuting distances, and housing density. Places in these theories are repositories for amenities and characteristics. The Tiebout hypothesis explains an equilibrating process driven by differences in preferences of amenities and local public goods.

But even the most sophisticated theories of space predict that two places with the same attributes and spatial characteristics would provide the same firms and families with the same flow of services and value. They predict symmetry among places with respect to migration costs, search costs, preferences, and location probability.

Geographic information systems (GIS) technology is an enormously important innovation, giving us the ability to deal empirically with space and place theories. GIS adds topology to our spatial toolbox and to our ability to understand and describe places. Topology allows us to articulate important and unique information about places and their relationship to other places. Topology makes every place potentially unique. But GIS is atheoretic. Without complementary theories of place, the ability to measure characteristics of place has limited value.

## IV. PLACE IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

Nobel Laureate E.O. Wilson (1998) calls on scientists, especially the social scientists, to strive for consilience, the "....'jumping together' of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation" (p. 8). He is especially critical of the social sciences for ignoring concepts in other sciences. He concludes, "the social sciences are striving to achieve it [predictive capacity], and to do so largely without linkage to the natural sciences. How well are they doing on their own? Not very well, considering their track record in comparison with the resources placed at their command" (Wilson 1998, p. 181). At this point, I would like to practice a little consilience and sample some of the theoretical concepts in geography, ethnography, and anthropology.

### Geography: Location, Locale, and Sense of Place

"Place matters because it structures the way we behave" (Flint, Harrower, and Edsall 2000, p. 3). With this as their rationale, Flint, Harrower, and Edsall (2000) call on political geographers to do more to develop theories of place. They

argue that the benefits make the complexity of place worth dealing with. They urge their colleagues to view places as structures rather than entities. Places as entities have attributes, whereas places as structures include the interactions, institutions, and geographic context. Flint, Harrower, and Edsall (2000) go on to suggest a place-based approach built on concepts articulated by a colleague, Agnew (1987), and extended by Massey (1994), in which there are three dimensions to place—what they call location, locale, and sense of place. Location refers to a place's role in the global milieu. A place's locale is its institutional, social, and geographic context. A place's sense of place is its self-identity. More on these later.

**Anthropology and Ethnography: Cosmic, Social, and Personal Space**

Anthropologists and ethnographers, like economists and sociologists, have traditionally eschewed particularities of place, focusing instead on the particularities of culture. Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 22) writes that, "Anthropologists don't study villages (tribe, towns, neighborhoods...); they study *in* Villages. You can study different things in different places, and some things—for example, what colonial domination does to established frames of moral expectation—you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn't make the place what it is you are studying."

But, as noted above, Wesley Kort (2001) argues that ethnographers and anthropologists have in the last half century started to find place (or human spatiality) more attractive. Place is seen as nurturing, rootedness as a virtue. Kort (2001) develops a framework of "human spatiality" in which he identifies three types of spaces: 1) cosmic or comprehensive space; 2) social space; and 3) personal or intimate space. These concepts of space have some parallels with those of Flint, Harrower, and Edsall (2000) and have counterparts in regional economic theories.

Cosmic space is roughly comparable with the regional scientist's concept of spatial theory and with location in the Agnew-Massey definition. It includes all places and all socioeconomic actors. It features environment, infrastructure, labor markets, competition, culture, etc. It embodies nature and has intrinsic value as a whole. Cosmic space has no boundaries.

Social space involves the relationships between people. Social spaces are constructed with invisible lines that overlap one another and vary from purpose to purpose. Social space roughly corresponds to our concepts of community and spatial markets, and to the Agnew-Massey concept of locale. Distance and space are integral but secondary to social relationships. It is at this scale that many regional science issues arise.

Kort's (2001) personal space is closest to what I am referring to as *place*. Like the Agnew-Massey concept of *sense of place*, it is relational but not social. Personal space is a characteristic of the individual. Personal space does not imply ownership since ownership is a social construct and thus more a part of social space. The qualities of personal spaces are variable and elusive. Kort (200) writes, "The force and significance of personal or intimate places arises from their

enhancement of potentials within persons and their relations, potentials that have content, so to speak, of their own."

According to the theory offered by Kort (2001), place relations have both physical and spiritual aspects. Physical aspects include the space itself and its contents, the location of people and things, and the proximity of people and things. Physical aspects also encompass the production, movement, and trade of goods and services. Spiritual aspects, on the other hand, are more forward oriented and include the indirect relationship between people and place and space. The spiritual aspect of place allows people to gain fulfillment (utility) from abstract relationships with places.

It is possible to view human-place relationships as involving passive places where things happen, or passive humans for whom places affect everyone equally. On the other hand, it is quite possible to see both places and people as active participants in human-place relationships.

## V. PUTTING MORE PLACE IN SPACE

The economic theories reviewed earlier represent important advances in our understanding of social and economic activities in space. But only a few of them are based on what I consider an adequate concept of place. If the above theories are deficient as place theories, what would a sufficient place theory look like? I suggest that we should expect the following characteristics of our theories of place:

1. Place theories should describe active relationships between people and places—relationships in which places have unique characteristics and individuals have unique preferences. That is, places should be viewed as structures rather than entities.
2. The place theories of regional scientists should be positioned within the context of cosmic space, but they should focus on the social and, especially, personal space.
3. Place theories should include the physical, economic, social, historical, cultural, and institutional dimensions of space as well as the spiritual dimension of space.

Is it possible for a place theory to deal with these apparent idiosyncrasies of place? Can we go beyond the case study without losing the uniqueness of places? The challenge is expressed by Flint, Harrower, and Edsall (2000, p. 4): "...the idea that 'place matters' is often asserted by reference to individual case studies, at best, or even anecdotal examples. What have been elusive are systematic studies showing how places matter." Other sciences and disciplines have developed workable, if not complete, place theories. Surely regional scientists can do as well or better.

I want to conclude not with answers to the questions raised above, but perhaps with some clues as to how we might proceed. A number of the regional science studies that I reviewed for this paper are not only in the right ballpark, to extend Ashby's (1986) metaphor, but they are getting some base hits.

For example, most widely accepted theories of migration behavior posit that migrants are attracted to jobs, amenities, and lower costs of living (Rasmussen, Fournier, and Charity 1989). The typical theory would predict that these amenities would attract any individual no matter where the individual resided or where the amenity occurred. Yet, empirical studies often show this situation to be inaccurate. Several recent studies have found that certain characteristics of a local population reduce the level of residential moves (Hacker 2000). An important characteristic is whether the family is renting or buying its house. As one might expect, renters are more mobile than owners are. This can be, and usually is, explained by arguing that homeowners have higher moving costs. However, an even more likely reason, and one that would be suggested by a place-based theory, is that families and individuals who own homes are more attached to place and that they derive utility directly from the place. Goss and Phillips (1997) find that home ownership and other measures of attachment to place decrease the length of unemployment periods. This is counter to a migration-based theory of labor market adjustment that would suggest a penalty for immobility. The authors theorize that because owners have mortgages to pay they undertake more vigorous job searches to reduce their period of unemployment. A more place-based theory would posit that social capital and greater local knowledge reduce job-search costs and other transaction costs. These are just a few examples of ways in which a more sophisticated theory of place might lead us to a different and hopefully deeper understanding of economic behavior.

Concluding, regional scientists have made enormous progress in understanding the roles of space and spatial distribution of place-based characteristics in human behavior. We have not, however, made much progress in understanding the role of particular places and their unique histories and institutions in the behavior of particular people. Outside the disciplines of economics and regional science, the notion that we can predict human behavior without reference to these aspects of place would be met with incredulity. It seems to me that to remain credible in a globalizing world, in a world of mobility and mixing of cultures, or glocalization as Thomas Friedman (1999, p. 236) calls it, we must work harder at understanding place. It seems to me that regional scientists, especially those in the South, where there are many people from places like Mechanicsville, could be and should be leaders in this area.

I want to thank you all once more for this great privilege. I am very proud to be a member of this community of scholars. Thank you.

**REFERENCES**

Agnew, J.A. *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society.* Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987.

Alonso, W. *Location and Land Use: Towards a General Theory of Land Rent.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Ashby, Lowell D. "The Region: Place or Process?" *The Review of Regional Studies* 16 (1) (1986), 1-5.

Cartwright, Joseph. "Regional Science and Public Management." *The Review of Regional Studies* 19 (2) (1989), 48-54.

Cho, Cheol-Joo. "Amenities and Urban Residential Structure: An Amenity-Embedded Model of Residential Choice." *Papers in Regional Science* 80 (4) (2001), 483-498.

Dickson, Robert E. *Regional Concept: The Anglo-American Leaders*. London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.

Flint, Colin, Mark Harrower, and Robert Edsall. "But *How* Does Place Matter? Using Bayesian Networks to Explore a Structural Definition of Place." Paper presented at New Methodologies for the Social Sciences: The Development and Application of Spatial Analysis for Political Methodology, University of Colorado at Boulder, March 10-12, 2000.

Friedman, Thomas L. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Gallagher, Winifred. *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions and Actions*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1993.

Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Goss, Ernest P., and Joseph M. Phillips. "The Impact of Home Ownership on the Duration of Unemployment." *The Review of Regional Studies* 27 (1) (1997), 9-28.

Hacker, R. Scott. "Mobility and Regional Economic Downturns." *Journal of Regional Science* 40 (1) (2000), 45-65.

Hamma, Robert. *Landscapes of the Soul: a Spirituality of Place*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1999.

Hite, James. "The Southern Contribution to Regional Science." *The Review of Regional Studies* 15 (3) (1985), 1-18.

Isserman, Andrew M. "Lost in Space? On the History, Status, and Future of Regional Science." *The Review of Regional Studies* 23 (1) (1993), 1-50.

Kort, Wesley A. "Sacred/Profane and an Adequate Theory of Human Place-Relations." Paper presented at the Constructions of Ancient Space Conference, Denver, Colo., November 17-20, 2001. Available at: http://www.cwru.edu/affil/GAIR/papers/2001papers/kort.htm.

Krum, Ronald J. "Regional Labor Markets and the Household Migration Decision." *Journal of Regional Science* 23 (3) (1983), 361-376.

Massey, D. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Mills, E.S. *Studies in the Structure of the Urban Economy*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972.

Muth, R.F. *Cities and Housing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Rasmussen, David W., Gary M. Fournier, and Douglas A. Charity. "The Impact of Cost of Living Differentials on Migration of Elderly People to Florida." *The Review of Regional Studies* 19 (2) (1989), 48-54.

Schaffer, William A. "Stagnation, Decline, and Development: A Trip through the Southern Countryside." *The Review of Regional Studies* 23 (3) (1993), 213-218.

Stegner, Wallace. *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. New York: Viking Press, 1962.

_____. *Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner*. New York: Random House, 1994.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.

Williams, Raymond. *People of the Black Mountains: The Beginning*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.

Wilson, Edward O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.