

Introduction: Contested Landscapes—Space, Place, and Identity in Contemporary Ireland

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Any place is a political place, it's a cultural space, it's a landscape.
—Alfredo Jaar 2007

Ireland's transition from a predominantly rural to a (sub)urban society over the course of the twentieth century coincided with fundamental changes in its socio-cultural and environmental fabric (Corcoran et al. 2007; Moore and Scott 2005; Punch 2004).¹ In particular, the recent suburbanization of many Irish towns and cities has raised interesting questions about the spatial organization of human social life. How important is public space for democratic participation? What kinds of spaces do people require to engage with others, or to get involved in community activities? Can we use spatial resources more sustainably and, if so, what are the consequences of such a transition for public and private spaces?

Planned suburbanization in Ireland began in the early twentieth century in response to housing problems in working class neighborhoods in Dublin's inner city, and the impacts of this spatial strategy have been subject to heated political debate ever since (McManus 2003). A "second wave" of increased and accelerated suburbanization during the so-called Celtic Tiger boom of the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in mixed responses, with "a negative view of the suburbs [infusing] the sociological literature and public imagination" (Corcoran et al. 2007: 175). Some have celebrated the increase in demand for housing and infrastructure as a sign of greater prosperity, improved social conditions, and the reversal of demographic trends from emigration to immigration. Many others have criticized the privatization of public space, the apparent withdrawal of many suburban dwellers from public life, and the unsustainable use of resources attributed to the car-dependent, suburban living (McDonald and Nix 2005; Redmond et al. 2006; Strohmayer 2007). Irish media accounts such as the Commuter Counties series in *The Irish Times* in spring of 2003 have described suburbia as soulless, unsustainable, and socially divisive. In



contrast, more positive views of suburbia as family-friendly, “green,” and “the best of both worlds” held by suburban dwellers themselves received little coverage. Ireland’s suburbanization of the 1990s has produced a “complex set of winners and losers” (Norris and Redmond 2006: 2), though this complexity is seldom recognized in the context of public debates around housing and property ownership.

The four articles in this special symposium titled “Contested Landscapes: Space, Place, and Identity in Contemporary Ireland” address some of the contradictions associated with the spatial restructuring of Irish society, most notably its increasing (sub)urbanization, and argue for a more nuanced debate of the spatiality of human social life that recognizes its complex outcomes for society and the environment. This special symposium is the result of the 4th Social Sciences Research Centre[SSRC] International Conference Workshop 2008, which took place at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and which brought together social scientists from Ireland and abroad. The workshop was an attempt to explore the potential opportunities and drawbacks of interdisciplinary socio-spatial approaches to the study of social and environmental change. What does the analysis of people’s spatial habits reveal about the characteristics of society-nature interaction? How does the production and consumption of space influence people’s identity and self-perception? Are there variations across different social groups and settings?

This article explores some of the consequences of changes in people’s spatial habits for land- and cityscapes, which have accompanied Ireland’s modernization and economic development. Using a range of concrete examples, an argument is made for a more systematic theoretical and empirical engagement with the spatiality of human social life as part of sustainability research efforts in the social sciences. The concluding part gives an overview of the other three articles included in this special symposium.

Tracing Rural and (Sub)urban Transitions: Development and Spatial Policy

The gradual blurring of urban-rural distinctions and boundaries and the growing interconnectedness of cities and their semi-rural hinterlands have been key features of Ireland’s spatial transformation (Corcoran et al. 2007; Panebianco and Kiehl 2003). Policies introduced since the 1960s have favored the location of economic activity in the



rural periphery and along the outskirts of cities. In the Dublin metropolitan area this “suburbanization of work” led to an inner city crisis from the 1980s on, though recent shifts in the structure of the global economy and urban governance seem to have reversed this trend somewhat (Punch 2004; Cf. Sassen 2002 for an analysis of the roles of cities in globalization). The emergence of new urban fringes and suburban commuter belts in Ireland in the 1990s and 2000s once again dramatically changed how people live and work; that is, how they create and inhabit different spaces.

Actual changes in the spatial composition of working and living environments in Ireland have taken many forms. In many cities and towns, green spaces, parks, and recreational areas have come under increased pressure from developers. Large-scale construction of predominantly detached and semi-detached (sub)urban housing in the late 1990s and early 2000s significantly contributed to urban sprawl and car dependency. In 2006 the total number of new house completions in Ireland reached a record high of 93,419 units or 21 dwellings per 1,000 population—the highest house building rate in Europe (DEHLG 2007: 12). The decision by many local authorities to sell off parts of their land banks or engage in land swaps with developers to raise additional funds further accelerated the disappearance of public space, unused plots of land, and wilderness areas. Although some of these developments have benefited the public, many others have not. For example, some land swaps resulted in sports and recreational facilities being moved out of prime locations in city center areas to larger, less accessible sites in the rural-urban fringe that could only be reached by car. Though the housing boom has now come to an end, its social, economic, and environmental consequences will continue to influence the political and physical landscape in Ireland for years to come.

Disputes over access have been at the heart of the public-private land debate in more rural areas, which also reflects a dramatic change in the role of the Irish countryside from primary locus of agricultural production to place of recreation (Lawless 2005). Calls for greater access to the countryside to accommodate leisure pursuits such as walking, cycling, and mountaineering continue to be resisted by some rural landowners. A political resolution remains elusive, partly because these disputes offer opportunities to voice grievances and express concerns about a range of complex development issues, including perceived power imbalances between the capital city Dublin and the rural periphery. Such debates may also bring to the fore tensions between domi-

nant ideas of progress and development that emphasize, among other things, individual entrepreneurship and short-term profit making, as well as certain established patterns of sociality that promote long-term thinking (Crowley 2006). Overall, the contestation both of spaces and of identities in (sub)urban and rural Ireland appears to revolve around notions of “the public” and “the private,” both of which are highly complex and laden with social and cultural meanings.

Responses to (the threat of) privatization of publicly accessible space have varied in form and effectiveness. Attempts to protect and reclaim public space have ranged from written planning submissions by individuals and NGOs—over practical initiatives such as “guerrilla gardening” and allotments—to direct action and protest at contentious sites such as the Hill of Tara. Recent examples of local community-led campaigns against the erosion of public space have focused on railway stations and other public transport hubs (Ceannt Station in Galway), parks and green spaces (People’s Park in Limerick, Terryland Forest Park in Galway), as well as specific historical vistas and built heritage (Georgian Dublin). Community-driven sustainable projects such as the Ecovillage in Cloughjordan have also attempted to challenge the hegemony of private tenure and to connect urban and rural living in innovative ways. However, the disappearance of amenity and public spaces remains a central element of the transformation of many Irish villages, towns, and cities and has, directly and indirectly, shaped the (political) landscape.

Debates concerning alternatives to current unsustainable housing and land use patterns have revolved around a number of key questions. What kinds of spaces do people consider to be desirable? How are street- and landscapes shaped by human intervention, and how can these processes be made more sustainable? How effective are current spatial planning and land use policies? What kinds of political and economic processes underpin these changes?

People’s relationship with and (dis)regard for different kinds of spaces reflect historical, cultural and political circumstances and impact on the natural and built environment in specific ways. Although suggestions that today’s land use patterns reflect both the historical significance of private property and the persistence of aspects of anti-urbanism associated with the nation-building process in Ireland require careful assessment and qualification, they highlight the need to engage with the social, political, and cultural dimensions of space. Social scientific inquiries into more sustainable land use patterns thus require new conceptual and methodological tools that could facilitate the



systematic investigation of past and present social, political, and environmental conditions. Recent socio-ecological studies of historic and contemporary changes in materials and energy flows and land use patterns as part of agrarian-industrial transitions illustrate the potential of interdisciplinary, multi-scalar research (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 2007).

Public Space, Private Governance, and Democracy

The relationship between power, politics, and the spatial organization of society has been subject to intensive debate in the social sciences, most notably as part of discussions on the significance of public space for democracy (Parkinson 2005, 2006). Some have linked the erosion and privatization of the public sphere to restrictions in political expression and freedom of speech (Klein 2000; Kohn 2004) and the decline in civic engagement and participation (Putnam 2000). Others have argued against dichotomous divisions of space into public and private, and for a more differentiated debate that recognizes the complexity and fluidity of “public” and “private” arenas of social interaction (Geuss 2001; Ó Riain 2006; Parkinson 2006; Sheller and Urry 2003). Ó Riain (2006) concludes that “the public sphere has long been seen as a vital component of democracy—without it, representative democracy and the rule of law can only provide a thin shell of representation and democratic debate over a hollow core of non-participation and political apathy. ... However, in contemporary societies the question of the public sphere is much more complex” (2006: 1–2).

Similarly, Peillon argues that “public space is not as universal as is generally made out” (2006: 162) because certain groups remain excluded from it, and that the emergence of “third places”—privately controlled, quasi-public places that facilitate sociability—deserves attention. Ireland’s integration into the global economy over the past few decades also increased the pressure for privatization, at least in some areas of public service provision. What are the concrete spatial outcomes of such privatization efforts and how do they impact on the socio-cultural fabric of Irish society? Although privatization in Ireland has been declared a resounding success by some (Barrett 2004), responses have been much more mixed overall (Reeves and Palcic 2004). Recent controversy surrounding the co-location of private hospitals on public hospital grounds contrast with examples of successful public-private partnerships such as Cork Music School. More important, pri-

vativation attempts have frequently provoked heated debates about equality of access to (natural) resources and its impact on local identity and people's sense of place. This is perhaps best illustrated by the Corrib Gas dispute in North Mayo in which "the concept of place ... combines concerns about perceived threats and risks arising from specific projects [off-shore drilling and on-shore processing of natural gas] with claims, both implicit and explicit, regarding human well-being and the quality of the natural environment [and] notions of the good life' (Garavan 2007: 844; see also Garavan 2008 for a discussion of the cultural and discursive dimensions of this dispute).

The introduction of social partnership in the late 1980s in Ireland fundamentally changed the relationship between state, economic interests, trade unions, and civil society and marked a transition from government to governance. Punch observes significant "shifts in the institutions, networks and practices of governance as reflected in the increasing popularity of public-private partnerships, QUANGOS [quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations] growth coalitions and, generally, the privatization of local politics" (2004: 10). This shift from government to governance, along with economic and demographic changes, also contributed to the spatial reorganization of Irish society, including the increasing spatial separation of domestic life, work, and leisure. The centralization and "quangoization" of spatial planning and infrastructure development both reduced some and created new regional imbalances in the allocation of public goods and services. At the same time, the location of economic activity and employment and the provision of infrastructure (transport links, broadband, other technology) became increasingly regulated by a set of complex, and at times conflicting, (supra)national spatial and developmental strategies, including the EU's European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP; 1999), the National Spatial Strategy (NSS; 2002–20), and the National Development Plan (NDP; 2007–13).

Power, Planning, and Public Debate

(Sub)urban and rural environments are shaped by political decision-making processes, which reflect and perpetuate existing power relations and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Flyvbjerg 1998). Ireland's spatial transformation has thrown up many questions regarding the inclusiveness of planning and policy making, linkages between power,



politics, and spatial zoning, or the relationship between property ownership and economic development (Meldon, Kenny and Walsh 2004; Rau 2008). Patrick Commins's (1996, 2004) investigations into the sources and distribution of poverty risks and patterns of social exclusion in rural Ireland exemplify the strengths of socio-spatial research work. His mapping of rural disadvantage shows its dynamics and distinctiveness vis-à-vis urban poverty and highlights the strength of spatial analysis in measuring poverty.

Although references to Ireland's spatial patterns of development as "worst case scenario" might be somewhat exaggerated, the spatial legacy of the so-called Celtic Tiger – dispersed settlement patterns, car dependent mobility, and consequently high per capita energy consumption—will require long-term remedial action. Why did efforts toward sustainable spatial development, including campaigns by Irish ENGOs (Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations) and repeated EU intervention, remain unsuccessful? Weak institutions, a political system conducive to clientelism, and the growing influence of neo-liberal politics opposed to state intervention and "outside interference" by the EU have been identified as barriers to more sustainable spatial planning and land use (McDonald and Nix 2005; also see Flynn 2007 for a discussion of similar developments in the area of environmental policy). Others point to conceptions of Irish politics as inherently local and rooted in place, which continue to influence the public's view of political actors and processes. Recent examples of "pork barrel politics" that benefited a particular constituency, such as substantial concessions given to a small number of independent public representatives to secure their support during government negotiations in 2007, are frequently used to support this claim.

Reflections and public debates on the connections between space, place, and identity, as well as their influence on public life and local and national politics in Ireland occur infrequently. A recent report on the state of Irish democracy detailed the role of the media in influencing public opinion and acknowledged the importance of the public sphere but did not attend to any spatial influences on public participation and democracy, such as place attachment and the quality of working and living environments (Democracy Commission 2005: esp. 187–88). The reasons for this apparent absence of spatial questions from public debate are manifold. Some have identified the economic and cultural dominance of private property vis-à-vis the relative marginality of public tenure as significant factor in spatial planning decisions

and environmental protection efforts (McKenna et al. 2005). Recent high-profile public inquiries into corrupt planning decisions involving elected representatives reframed planning as highly contentious matter best left to “neutral” professionals outside the realm of politics. It could be argued that this depoliticization of spatial decision making has, at least to some extent, curbed public debate on the relationship between place, politics, and democracy.

There are, however, notable exceptions. For example, the creation of “landscapes of exclusion” (Kitchin and Law 2001) through spatial planning practices that ignore the needs of vulnerable groups in society has been highlighted in the social science literature. A number of socio-spatial studies conducted in Ireland have made visible the relationship between patterns of social (dis)advantage and the location of different social functions, including employment, care, leisure, or transport infrastructure. Kitchin and Law’s (2001) study of the impacts of (in)accessible public toilets on disabled people’s participation in public life in Ireland, North and South, illustrates the exclusionary consequences of “design solutions” that prioritize the economic and spatial interests of able-bodied members of society.

Focusing on access to toilets might at first seem myopic. However, we would contend that the public toilet is still very much at the heart of contemporary struggles over space and provides a useful illustration of a larger point: how landscapes are constructed through particular power geometries and shaped by notions of citizenship and social justice. Indeed the provision and siting of toilets is highly illustrative of the socio-spatial processes that regulate and exclude disabled people from everyday spatial arenas, and reveals the extent to which many public spaces represent ‘landscapes of exclusion’ (Kitchin and Law 2001: 288).

(Lack of) access to public buildings such as city and county halls, school, libraries, and public toilets thus functions as “litmus test” for a society’s commitment to equality, social justice, and inclusion. At the same time, it reveals the potential limitations and exclusionary dimensions of public space for particular groups in society.

Sustainability and Spatial Resources

The dialectical relationship between society and physical environment produces complex temporal and spatial conditions for human social interaction and the (re)production of social meanings and prac-



tices. Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) concept of the production of space, Richardson and Jensen define social space as both "a field of action and a basis for action, on scales from the body to the global" (2003: 8). However, different groups in Irish society both experience these spatial constraints and opportunities very differently. Spatial practices that encourage the car-based "consumption of distance" as a strategy for bridging the separation of people's homes from their places of work produce fields of action for some people while closing down others. Opportunities for interaction between parents and their children afforded by the daily school run by car contrast with the growing isolation of non-motorized households in rural areas (McDonald and Nix 2005; Rau and Hennessy forthcoming; Wickham 2006).

In addition to their social consequences, spatial practices also produce and in turn depend on various material and energy flows, as is exemplified by patterns of fossil fuels consumption for individualized (auto)mobility. Between 1990 and 2005, greenhouse gas emissions from the Irish transport sector increased by 160 percent (ICCC 2006), with transport being responsible for almost 20 percent of Ireland's overall emissions. Changes in the ways in which people use space are instrumental in the transition to sustainability. Prominent members of society such as *The Irish Times* environmental editor Frank McDonald and TV presenter, architect and energy expert Duncan Stewart have been instrumental in raising public awareness of sustainability issues related to the built environment and the use of space. Public space issues have also come to the fore during environmental campaigns, including high-profile conservation efforts by NGOs such as the Irish Georgian Society and An Taisce. The extent to which these efforts constitute successful attempts by "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963; Yearley 1991) to permanently shift public opinion remains subject to debate; however, their role in drawing attention to spatial issues deserves attention in this context.

Overall, problems associated with the use of finite resources per se also apply to the use of space. As Parkinson points out, "relevant to any discussion of public space will be the usual issues that arise with other public goods, namely ensuring their continuing existence given the free-rider problem and the 'tragedy of the commons'" (2006: 5). Ireland's spatial transition from the rural to the (sub)urban has illustrated both the opportunities and challenges such a transformative process can bring for society and the environment.

Researching Sustainability: Opportunities and Challenges of Socio-Spatial Approaches

While space has traditionally been seen as the domain of geography, town planning, and engineering, recent interdisciplinary socio-spatial studies of land use, transport and mobility, or patterns of (sub)urban and rural development have added important insights (see Corcoran et al. 2007 for an example from Ireland). What makes space particularly interesting for social scientists and those involved in interdisciplinary sustainability research are its socio-cultural and political aspects, many of which are connected with particular spatial practices. The economic and political significance and the myriad of cultural meanings associated with home ownership in Ireland exemplify this complexity and interconnectedness between society and setting (Norris and Redmond 2006). This poses a number of conceptual and methodological challenges. How can existing approaches to the study of human society be extended to include significant spatial dimensions? The articles in this symposium aim to answer some of these questions by presenting four instances of socio-spatial analysis based on evidence from contemporary Irish society.

An interest in space and spatiality is nothing new in the social sciences but goes back to the beginnings of many (sub)disciplines, most notably human and historical geography and urban and historical sociology (see Friedman 2003 for an overview). Historical socio-spatial explanations from late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban sociology and other related fields of inquiry provide important insights and suggestions, in particular in relation to the kinds of questions they raise (and perhaps less so regarding the specific answers they provide). Simmel's work (1950 [1903]) on the relationship between urban form, spatiality, and social and mental life in modern society exemplifies this. However, the growing interconnectedness of the world and the resulting globality of human social life, including people's responses to global environmental threats such as climate change, require novel analytical approaches that both build on and subsequently extend existing work. Recent theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of physical (im)mobility have addressed some of these issues (Ray 2002; Turner 2007; Urry 2000, 2007).

The political and aesthetic formation of (public) space, in particular in urban areas, has been the focus of some recent sociological studies (e.g., Sennett 1991, 1994). Similarly, seminal studies on the spatiality of social and political phenomena such as citizenship, civil society,



democratic participation, power, development, or physical (im)mobility have illustrated the relationship between society and setting (Flyvbjerg 1998; Harvey 2006; Sennet 1977; Urry 2007;). This upsurge in socio-spatial work has led some to proclaim a “spatial turn” in social theory and research (Parkinson 2006; Soja 1989). However, some qualification is necessary here. Only a few years ago Turner and Rojek aptly deplored the exclusion of space from much contemporary sociology and argued for a sociological imagination that takes the spatial context of human action seriously:

Sociologists have been somewhat neglectful of the specificity of place in their analysis of social action. ... We call this aspect of social relations ‘the emplacement of action’ to indicate the placing of acts in a physical and social context. ... Building a home and creating a garden remain, in an age of breathtaking technology, fundamental activities of everyday life. (2001: xi).

Similarly, a coherent theoretical and methodological framework for a sociology of space appears to remain a distant goal, with many studies “borrowing” from existing work in adjacent academic fields instead. Parkinson welcomes recent social research on space and power but laments that “when social and urban scholars write about democracy and public space they tend to do so assuming a rather thin, unproblematic concept of democracy” (2006: 1). Finally, social scientists—especially those interested in the environment and sustainability—also need to be wary of studies that overemphasize spatial aspects and fail to integrate these concerns with other important dimensions of human social life, most notably time and temporality (Adam 1990, 1998; Adam and Groves 2007; Rau 2002). “Although our approach emphasizes spatiality as an inescapable component of social life, we acknowledge that it is simply one of the factors which need to be analyzed to understand social conditions and dynamics. In some cases, it is crucial to this understanding, in others less so” (Richardson and Jensen 2003: 8).

But what might a sociology of space for the twenty-first century look like? Richardson and Jensen maintain that a cultural sociology of space “hinges on the dialectical relation between material practices and the symbolic meanings social agents attach to their environment” (2003: 8). This suggests that synthesis rather than demarcation of themes and disciplinary differences is likely to advance the social scientific study of space and spatiality, in particular in the context of sustainability research.

The three articles that follow address the issue of space by deploying innovative and interdisciplinary approaches. Mary Corcoran, Jane

Gray, and Michel Peillon's article identifies important spatial factors that are part of growing up in suburban Ireland today. Using data from four Irish suburbs, they show how children select aspects of their physical environment to build up and maintain a sense of self and to develop their personality. Interactions with nature form an integral part of these processes of socialization. More important, however, the authors challenge perceptions of children as passive recipients of (planning) decisions made by adults. Instead, the article highlights the children's active and creative role in opening up new and apparently disused spaces and thus opportunities for interaction and sociability for members of suburban communities. Children's contribution to social fabric of suburban communities, a topic that has hitherto attracted little attention in the social scientific and planning literature on the suburbanization of Ireland, is recognized in this article.

The erosion of childhood environments, including the closure of public rights of way between suburban housing estates for safety reasons and to prevent "anti-social" behavior, is often related to risk perceptions regarding the natural environment as well as "the other." Though the consequences of these alterations for sociability, interaction, and communication have previously remained underexplored, Mary Corcoran and colleagues show that they are substantial and cut across different social and age groups. The disappearance of public and "in-between" spaces in suburban Ireland not only affects how children get around, it also impacts on their sense of self. The authors' interdisciplinary approach reveals that the formation of a suburban identity is inextricably linked to the spatial conditions in which children find themselves, and which they (re)shape on a continuous basis.

Marie Mahon, Frances Fahy, Micheál Ó Cinnéide, and Brenda Gallagher adopt a political geography approach to investigating spatial determinants of local governance and civic engagement in the urban-rural fringe. Their data shows that the population of fringe locations around Galway City in the West of Ireland constitutes a diverse group with different needs, views, and practices. The article touches on an important theme, namely whether and to what extent spatial and temporal factors such as the location and accessibility of their homes, or familiarity with their neighborhood influence people's participation in local democratic processes. The article does not suggest that high or low participation levels can necessarily be linked to variations in suburban form; instead Mahon et al. argue that changes in people's physical environment such as the construction of new houses can sometimes act as catalyst for collective local action, partly because



they invoke a shared place vision. People's place attachment (or lack thereof) can thus either help or hinder the formation of community ties, as reported by local people themselves.

Social scientific inquiries into complex society-nature interactions face many methodological challenges that require innovative approaches. Mahon and colleagues' contribution to this symposium clearly illustrates the advantages of a multimethod research design for measuring civic engagement and its connections with specific physical attributes of place. The article presents empirical evidence from four different fringe locations that show how participatory practices can become embedded in a specific location or community. More important, the data reveals the richness and diversity of forms of civic engagement in these "new" locations. The article also points toward possibilities for future research based on a comparison of levels of participation across different types of location.

Eamonn Slater and Michel Peillon's socio-spatial analysis of five suburbs of Dublin focuses on the production and consumption of visual aspects of the front garden, which they see as an important buffer zone between the private space of the house and the public realm of the suburban street. Their article synthesizes key sociological explanations of power, space, and inequality (Sennett, Foucault, Marx) to show how people's physical environment shapes their social habits and vice versa. It is argued that common class and power differences in Ireland's capital city also find their physical expression in the design of suburban housing estates, in particular in the composition of front gardens.

Slater and Peillon's innovative use of visual data illustrates how gardening constitutes a labor process steeped in social meaning, which (re)produces spatial expressions of social cleavages and which also epitomizes key features of human-nature relationships in modern society. They show how particular features of the front garden either facilitate or prevent communication and gazing. As a result, visibility emerges as a prime social process that both reflects and shapes particular aspects of suburban form. The article is also critical of sociological explanations of human-nature relationships, which overemphasize the social construction of nature and neglect the momentum or *Eigen-dynamik* of natural processes. Slater and Peillon argue for a conceptualization of the front garden as locus of interaction between natural processes (plant growth, wildlife) and human intervention (gardening, gazing), which is characterized by various material in- and outputs. Rather than acting as a "black box," the front garden facilitates a

plethora of metabolic processes, such as the application of fertilizer or the introduction of ornamental plants, which reflect both the socio-economic status and cultural capital of their owners and prevailing environmental conditions.

All three articles illustrate how theoretically informed, systematic inquiries into the spatiality of social life can yield important insights into the relationship between society and physical setting. At the same time, they challenge more conventional explanatory models that conceptualize nature as object of human intervention. All three contributions show that the transition to sustainability is likely to require fundamental changes in how spatial resources are allocated and used, in particular in the context of newly emerging (sub)urban locations. The complex patterns of interaction between (political) power, economic development, and socio-cultural habits, which they describe and analyze, give an indication of the multiple challenges that will affect the transition to more sustainable spatial practices.

Summary

Richardson and Jensen see a primary function of a cultural sociology of space in its ability to address the “coercive and enabling effects of socio-spatial relations on social practices, [emphasizing] not only the material dimensions of human agency but also the significance of power” (2003: 10). This special symposium discusses some of the advantages and difficulties that characterize interdisciplinary, socio-spatial approaches to the study of society-nature interaction. Using examples from Ireland as a starting point, this introductory article has shown how an engagement with the spatiality of social life can substantially add to the existing body of knowledge in key thematic areas of social scientific inquiry such as power, participation, and democracy.

Parkinson’s (2006) call for a return to the literal meaning of “public space”—that is, a renewed engagement with its spatial dimensions to counterbalance more abstract and metaphoric conceptions, such as public space as “the public sphere” per se, the media or (virtual) networks of people—seems particularly apt in the context of interdisciplinary sustainability research that problematizes the relationship between society and physical environment. This also suggests that the so-called spatial turn in the social sciences remains incomplete, partly because of the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the multiple roles and functions of space in society. Parkinson (2006) and Peillon (2006)



rightly criticize the delimiting effects of simplistic and overly abstract notions of the spatial organization of social life, as exemplified by the serious limitations of conceptual divisions of space into public and private. The relative scarcity of theoretically informed empirical research further adds to these conceptual difficulties. The articles presented in this special symposium show that the (re)conceptualization of space as a major factor in human social life promises significant insights into the nature and complexity of socio-ecological transitions and adaptation.



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Note

1. Unless otherwise stated in the text, the term “Ireland” refers to the Republic of Ireland.

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