

CONSIDERING SPACE

A Critical Concept for the Social Sciences



EDITED BY DOMINIK BARTMANSKI, HENNING FÜLLER,
JOHANNA HOERNING AND GUNTER WEIDENHAUS

THE REFIGURATION OF SPACE

‘Mixing conceptual exploration and case illustration, this lively volume will make its readers think again and anew about the role of space in social theory and social life.’

–**Loïc Wacquant**, *Professor of Sociology, University of California Berkeley, USA, author of Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory*

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–**Eduardo de la Fuente**, *Adjunct Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of South Australia, co-editor of Aesthetic Capitalism and author of Twentieth Century Music and the Question of Modernity*



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Seeking to show how society can and should be perceived as spatial, it will appeal to scholars of sociology, geography, architecture and urban studies.

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The Refiguration of Space

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Considering Space

A Critical Concept for the Social Sciences

Edited by

**Dominik Bartmanski, Henning Füller,
Johanna Hoerning and Gunter Weidenhaus**

Cover image: ©Dominik Bartmanski

First published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bartmanski, Dominik, 1978– editor. | Füller, Henning, 1977– editor.

| Hoerning, Johanna, editor. | Weidenhaus, Gunter, editor.

Title: Considering space : a critical concept for the social sciences / edited by Dominik Bartmanski, Henning Füller, Johanna Hoerning, Gunter Weidenhaus.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. |

Series: The refiguration of space | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2023010991 (print) | LCCN 2023010992 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032420882 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032420899 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781003361152 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Space perception. | Social sciences—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC BF469 .C67 2023 (print) | LCC BF469 (ebook) |

DDC 153.7/52—dc23/eng/20230321

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010991>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023010992>

ISBN: 978-1-032-42088-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-42089-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-36115-2 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003361152

Typeset in Times New Roman

by codeMantra

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1 Introduction

An Invitation to Spatial Theorizing

Dominik Bartmanski and Henning Füller

Finding Space

When we look for a suitable apartment, an increasingly arduous task these days, we inevitably run into a variety of questions about space. ‘Where is it?’ ‘How big is it?’ The implied spatial concepts such as size and location seem inescapable. Indeed, they constitute necessary knowledge. But to understand how they help give rise to our sense of the homely, the domestic or the private, we must go beyond reified, static notions of standardized measurements. We must theorize the spatial in much ‘thicker’, multidimensional and dynamic ways. Yet everyday life is saturated with these seemingly self-evident, reductive habits of perception and evaluation. The British word ‘flat’ or the German term *Immobilie* (real estate) hints at this ‘thin’ static perception: they symptomatically single out specific characteristics of space, concealing a whole gamut of other spatial meanings. To develop new ‘thicker’ descriptions of the spatiality of social life, one needs to avoid both ‘flat’ materialism and rarified constructivism of major social scientific traditions and to unpack relational, emergent significance of space. Acknowledging the “thrown togetherness” of place, its formation out of a “particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus”, Massey (1993: 66) underlines this problem and points to irreducible relationality of space. The move towards relational thinking is a move away from discursive idealism as well as essentialist reductionism.

One of the reasons why we start our introduction by invoking a flat to live in can be stated simply: it is a remarkably concrete but multifaceted heuristic object in which to anchor our project of thinking the social out of the spatial. It is a decisively modest but by the same token more relatable strategy to drive home new points about what Homi Bhabha (1994) famously called the ‘location of culture’. While the metaphoric potential of spatial vocabulary has been extensively rehearsed in that work (and the social theory it inspired), the actual spatiality of social life was not. Yet it is precisely because “the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions” (Bhabha 1994: 13) that such a turn towards space can prove fruitful. The gist of this observation is not a novelty to sociologists. In his ‘Outline of a Theory of Practice’, Pierre Bourdieu (2012: 89) made a crucially important point that “inhabited space – and above all the house – is the principal locus for the objectification of the generative schemes”. It’s just that when he wrote

it he was more preoccupied with the schemes themselves than with the reciprocal conditionalities that emerge between the spatial and the social.

So revisiting such spatial entities as private flats or public venues helps bring to light not only the importance of space as a ‘room of one’s own’, but – even more significantly – it helps reconsider the under-developed nature of our socio-spatial consciousness. For example, as Kelcie Vercel and Terence McDonnell show in their contribution to this volume, apartments provide a useful testing ground for researching these issues sociologically. Looking at how commercial staggers of apartments influence potential buyers’ perception of a given real estate, they shed light on the salient definition of space as the *arrangement of affordances* and therefore reveal space to be a kind of environment comprising ‘ecologies of objects, spaces, and bodies’. They emphasize that while the so-defined space has its multiple identifiable phenomenological parameters, it is not as rigidly pre-signified as one might think; instead, it is open to interpretation and imaginative remaking within the limits of its relationally established and mutually elaborative properties, references and settings.

Exploring these potentialities and limits in concrete sociological settings proved transformative. For one thing, looking at how spatial design not only conventionally reflects human values but also variably performs them has inspired a variety of practical and theoretical domains. From the old architectural conception of ‘private spaces’ of Adolf Loos (Parcerisas 2017) to the new heavily surveilled apartment complexes of smart cities built from scratch one hundred years later (Bartmanski et al. 2022), apartments encapsulate and stage the predominant forms of our individual existence and our collective imaginaries. They are the stuff of our everyday life, equally so for their banal and sacred moments. And yet, their very spatiality has not been foregrounded; rather, it is subject to repeated trivializing reification which permeates also many other forms and objects of analysis, regardless of scale and time.

In short, palpable spatial actualities such as apartments are propitious springboards for much broader conversations about the relational meaning of space. They are both concrete and open-ended: finite as actual places of human life and potentially infinite as spaces of sense and meaning-making; they are concrete as built environments that we can feel sensuously, and open-ended as experiential spheres of possible meanings that we can contemplate intellectually. Approached in this spirit, such spaces can be shown to have more socio-cultural efficacy than typically assumed. As Nana Last (2008) demonstrated in her book ‘Wittgenstein’s House: Language, Space and Architecture’, there exists a mutually constitutive set of relations between even the loftiest of philosophical ideas and seemingly most banal aspects of dwelling and house design. The experience of designing a house for his family member in Vienna gave Ludwig Wittgenstein an impulse to reconsider and then change his entire philosophical thinking. Some relevant aspects of this fascinating story are presented below in Nana Last’s contribution to this volume.

Again, this line of reasoning is not entirely new, although it seems somewhat overshadowed today. In his famous yet singularly topical book ‘The Poetics of

Space', Gaston Bachelard (2014) invites us to consider homes, flats and houses – no matter how humble – as repositories of crucial personal and social meanings. Bachelard – not unlike another Frenchman before him, Henri Bergson – bemoaned the conceptual restrictions of what he saw as the overly rationalistic twentieth-century positivist mindset. He attempted to expand social imagination by rejecting rigid traditional dichotomies of subject and object, mind and matter, active and passive, trying instead to use a new phenomenological analysis of homely spaces. His goal was to illuminate a more holistic perspective on human life. Once such a more multidimensional view was adopted, he could appreciate – for instance – the fact that we are both made by “material images” of spaces and that “we remake them in our turn” (Kearney 2014: xix). Similarly, in her analysis of the iconic modern work of Adolf Loos, especially his theory of architecture as clothing, Pilar Parcerisas (2017: 21) writes that to Loos “the interior is like casing, a dress that protects the individual and resolves the split between the individual being and the social being”. Here another dualism was undone. When one recalls in this context Daniel Miller’s (2010: 12) insistence that clothing is “not superficial” but – on the contrary – something anthropologically crucial, a set of productive conceptual connections emerges. We argue that foregrounding the notion of space makes them more palpable. The present volume aims to explore as many of them as possible within the confines of a single book.

This kind of reflexivity had not been commonplace in social scientific practice in the twentieth century. With a notable exception of geography, space for a long time remained a peripheral, residual category of analysis. Many social scientists who thematized and prioritized questions of nation, state, housing, architecture or urbanity would typically take ‘space’ for granted or hold a “static, the so-called ‘container’ view of space, something that remains unmapped because it does not have to undergo such representational transformation. And yet, “it is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings. Place, like the subject, is the site of becoming, the opening for politics” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxiii).

Considering material and social objects as entities *separated* from space seems now untenable. While this had been well understood by modern avant-garde sculptors who, like Katarzyna Kobro (2019: 19), saw their work as the relational ‘shaping of space’, classic social theory lagged behind art and architecture. Hence the challenge at hand – to find a right headspace for considering space anew, to account for the spatiality of social figurations. So, what exactly is to be done?

Space in Social Science

One must remember that talking about space is still a kind of provocation for many social scientists. As a fundamental aspect of being in the world, space appears as something immutable and given, and therefore, it has been left out of the scope of systematic research. The chief preoccupation was with time – social processes and dynamics – while space was seen as the rather unproblematic *surface*: a stable

sphere wherein a multiplicity of discrete things is dispersed. The spatial qualities of phenomena did not seem empirically problematic or theoretically fruitful for social science. For a long time, space had not been an integral part of what C. Wright Mills famously called ‘the sociological imagination’, nor was it systematically included in the critical theorizations of cognate disciplines such as anthropology. It was symptomatic that in his book, Bachelard criticized social scientific perspectives of his time for their rather tightly circumscribed imagination and saw his philosophy of space as a step towards redressing this problem.

This has arguably changed or began to change around 1989 when social reality seemed somewhat ahead of sociological imagination. At that time, several major disciplinary revaluations took place. As a result, the implicit everyday idea of space as a singular and pre-given background has received a more detailed critique and consideration in social and cultural sciences. New scientific journals featuring a spatial focus have been created. The ‘spatial turn’ is a common denominator for this shifting of interest towards the social construction of space, and as such, it has been included in the wave of ‘cultural turns’ that marked social sciences at the turn of centuries – among them the performative, the postcolonial and the iconic (Bachmann-Medick 2007). While spatiality does receive increasing attention now, especially as a contingent part of the social, and something to be understood relationally, it did not yet penetrate social scientific disciplines in a way that would be commensurate with its fundamental and multifaceted nature. Spaces are acknowledged as socially configured – as shaped, structured and invested with meaning. Space can be, and increasingly is, used to indicate the social – from dynamics of power to structures of everyday meaning-making. But there is less understanding about the reverse causal directionality, i.e. about how spatial forms shape our forms of life. As social scientists, we need to recognize that there is more to space than its indexical capacity; space is socially implicative through its affordances and constitutive relations. In addition to the social configuration of space, we need to ask questions about the spatiality of the social, especially how space anchors, frames, enables and constrains certain classes of action and order. This is one of the motivations behind this volume. In many significant contemporary theorizations of the social, space still tends to appear as a taken-for-granted and passive background rather than a composite consequential condition of life. Considering social change, space is mostly seen as an immobile unitary background where social and historical processes get inscribed, a screen for cultural projection. In his argument for a more reflective approach, Rob Shields (2017: 536) describes the typical sociological imagination of space: “[A] spatialization in which a three-dimensional, lived reality is permeated, skewered, by determining social forces that are abstract and one-dimensional, that is, temporal and historical”.

An invitation to the spatial theory that we have in mind presupposes that it is productive to question this constrained traditional understanding. What if space is considered more seriously and multidimensionally, not only as something that ‘expresses’ social processes but as a central condition that ‘impresses’ itself on social life? Such a systematically developed and widely applicable conceptual turn towards space in social theory is yet to be accomplished. “Spaces are seen as social, but society is not perceived as spatial”, as Martina Löw and Hubert Knoblauch

point out (2020: 264). This very gap motivates the collection of essays brought together in this volume. But our collective effort is not merely about closing this gap. It is about interrogating the origins of the problem and explaining the significance of potential solutions. For one thing, space helps revisit several fundamental issues, from the operations of political power as described by Foucault (Soja 1994) to the phenomenology of perception and the meaning of the body (Merleau-Ponty 2012; Johnson 2007).

An early and prominent example of taking space more systematically into account is Henri Lefebvre's (1996: 196) project of a 'science of the production of space'. Lefebvre underlined the inherent spatiality of the social and criticized the existing, compartmentalized approach in social sciences, where each subfield and discipline only engages with a specific, narrowly circumscribed aspect of the spatial. This divisional approach hinders an understanding of space as a sociological analytic category. In his critique, "science disperses itself in divisions and representations of space, without ever discovering [...] the principles of understanding" (Lefebvre 1996: 196). Instead, the spatial should be acknowledged as an independent condition of the social, as a way of approaching and understanding our social world which could allow us to eschew usual binaries of the Western metaphysics, e.g. between a materialist fixation on structures and an idealist focus on subjective experiences (Schmid 2008). Because the late-modern social condition is defined by an essential rupture between experience and scientific knowledge, this appears even more important. "The thread is torn, between the Real and the Symbolic, between the existential experience of everyday spaces and their representation in ideology, science and culture" (Prigge 1991: 103, trans. HF). Lefebvre's proposal to rely on space as a way out of this dilemma is unique, unfinished and still appealing.

Another significant early proponent of a similar claim was the geographer Doreen Massey. She vigorously argued for a shift away from just seeing spaces as mere projections and expressions of social constructions. Instead, there is a dormant analytical potential in 'turning the coin', so to speak, and approaching the relation of space and the social from the other side: *to understand the spatiality of the social construction*. If the social is necessarily organized spatially, space is not only viable as an expression or an 'outcome' of social processes. The spatial organization of the social needs to be understood also as a vital factor in social development and cultural change. "In other words, and in its broadest formulation, society is necessarily constructed spatially, and that fact – the spatial organization of society – makes a difference to how it works" (Massey 1992: 70). Once we accept this formulation, a series of questions immediately arise. What difference does space make? What is the relation between space and other categories of social sciences? How could the 'spatial organization of the social' inform social theory? What exactly is to be gained from understanding the social with and through space? Or, to put it more concretely, does acknowledging the spatial construction of society allow for a better understanding of the social? How can this become operative in empirically observable situations where such categories as power or state are investigated? Insofar as Foucault was right to insist both on the 'power/knowledge' contraction and on the importance of space, then it is vital to ask questions about the 'power/space' contraction and see how they change our understanding of social construction.

Benefits to Consider the Spatiality of the Social

Each contribution in this volume aims to provide a range of answers to these questions. Our objective is not to reintroduce a new kind of conceptual hierarchy topped by space. Rather, it is about offering a series of more comprehensive perspectives that complement the already existing ones. It is an invitation to step back, to refresh the perception and to make more space for space in social theory and research. For example, sociologists have tended to assume that any issue or problem traditionally placed within their discipline stems ‘out of the social’. Social outcomes could be traced back to a confluence of specific social variables. Things were declared to not be knowable ‘in themselves’. They have been claimed to be always ‘socially constructed’, the ‘surface signs’ referring to the immaterial ‘social depth’, or a ‘deep play’ of culture. While this perspective offered some transformative insights, it was not the last word of social science. As we shall indicate, new forms of both constructivist and non-representational analysis have emerged. We nowadays witness strong calls to “explore human inhabitation – how humans inhabit their ‘ecological niches’ – and examine a number of conceptual developments that ‘deconstruct’ the binary distinction between organism and environment” (Rose, Birk, Manning 2021). New epistemologies have been tested, new social critiques articulated, and ontologies pluralized. The idea behind our volume is to make a decisive step towards collating a multiplicity of such voices, connecting the dots of extant space-related analysis and taking stock of our growing but still fragmented and dissipated spatial knowledge. In the remaining part of the introduction, before sketching out the structure of the volume, we want to underline a few benefits of the proposal ‘to think the social out of the spatial’.

Benefit I – Questioning Assumptions and Concepts

The first benefit to consider space more explicitly for social theory is related to the fundamental status of *concept* as an intellectual tool. The ways in which we form and legitimize knowledge and the ways we access the empirical world, both concretely and abstractly, are invariably organized spatially. The power of spatial thinking is expressed for example in the ubiquity of spatial metaphors in language. But the naïve ‘taken-for-granted’ understanding of space can get in the way if it is put to work as a lens for analysing the social. When trying to figure out how space is made relevant in society, we must be careful not to reify or essentialize our own presumptions. Furthermore, a careful dissection of several meanings is especially needed with this over-determined concept. The usage of a common term ‘space’ for a range of different aspects of the social implies a connection between them without being able to define it. Territorializing parts of the planet or investing places with meaning are two spatial expressions of the social, but it is not clear if and how those expressions are related. If there is a quality of its own, undergirding some of the manifold spatial expressions of the social, this must be carefully delineated. Cautious analysis is advisable regarding the historical and social contingency of an often-presumed universality of the category of ‘space’ and regarding the slippages of meaning when applying the same concept to a range of social phenomena.

Asking the question of what space ‘as such’ is often does lead away from finding precise and relevant answers. Too much remains presupposed and ‘black boxed’ here. Broad and over-determined concepts such as *space* generally need to be carefully operationalized and related to an analytical purpose rather than investigated abstractly. What difference does space make for a specific relation, process or phenomenon (e.g. practices of territorialization, exercise of state power, military action, qualities of belonging and place-making, conceptions of geographical imaginations)? With the enigmatic work of Henri Lefebvre, we have a singular but powerful example for the opposing claim. Differentiating space according to its function has led to a “compartmentalization of the specialized sciences” (Lefebvre 1996: 196) but has left open the possibility to “recognize in the infinite mass of details the principles of understanding which prevail in a field” (ibid.). Could there be a benefit of (re)formulating our knowledge of the production of space rather than following several discretionary ‘sciences of space’, as Lefebvre suggests?

Rob Shields, for example, has recently reaffirmed this argument. He concretizes Lefebvre’s expectation to take space as a means for a critical understanding of hegemony and the encompassing second nature of capitalist social relations. Instead of using space as a universal concept in analysis, the conception of space as such should be put into question. Given the fundamental importance of space in maintaining our epistemological categories, in order to think beyond the totality of the social condition, Lefebvre suggests considering the struggles “over the organization and meaning of space” (Shields 2013: 19). “Is not the near hegemony of the ‘absolutist’ view of social space only one possible stance among many?” (ibid.) Does not this implicit idea of a Cartesian, a priori and ineffable ‘social space’ provide an important but unacknowledged disposition for power and alienation? Similarly, David Graeber (2007) sensitizes us in his text ‘There Never Was a West’ to the intellectual liabilities and insidious politicization of such widely reproduced hegemonic categories as the ‘Western’ culture. Showing that the irresolvable contradictions of this term are not just a matter of misplaced linguistic traditions and misguided discursive strategies, he rightly argues – not unlike Bhabha – that “we need an entirely new set of categories” (Graeber 2007: 17), including ‘emergence’ of socio-spatial systems and zones of cultural contact and hybridity that continually define and redefine human conditions.

In this sense, fundamentally engaging with space can be fruitful for a critical social theory. Sketching out those opposing expectations towards space as a concept in social theory hints at an unresolved and productive ambiguity. Considering the conception of space is viable *for* social theory: to gain more precise tools for social analysis against the danger of letting the everyday concept of space slip into our analytical repertoire. But an engagement with the concept of space may be even viable *in* social theory: to use the production of space itself as a key for social understanding – following Lefebvre’s idea of taking space to reflect our totalizing social condition.

Benefit II – Acknowledging Emergent Qualities

The second benefit of a spatial approach in social theory is the invitation to allow the material and the non-human to be part of the constitution of the social. One

general guiding definition of space offered by Martina Löw, which serves as the sociological reference point here, states that space is a distribution of material and symbolic phenomena that we could jointly call ‘social goods’. Conceiving of space as an arrangement of affordances as we stated above or as a distribution of objects and material relations is practical because it moves away from abstract notions of space and towards more synthetic complex ones, whereby body, objects, environments, ecologies and meanings can be conjoined. Of course, materiality and the relationships of the human to non-human have been extensively theorized in disciplines concerned with the socially ‘constructed’ nature of reality (e.g. Miller 2005; Latour 2007; Elder-Vass 2012; Hodder 2012). Space offers a new conceptual plane of systematically relating to each other these heterogenous, often divergent social theories of materiality. One important consideration that we foreground here, however, is how to use space in a productively synthetic rather than analytically divisive way. We invite researchers to ask how we should reinscribe ‘spatiality’ into perennial questions of social sciences. That is to say, how to reconsider ‘space’ theoretically, so that it is neither essentialized as an ‘inert background’, nor reduced to a dependent disembodied and delocalized variable. How to avoid the pitfalls of materialistic reification as well as pernicious forms of structuralist idealism in which space is but a screen of our seemingly arbitrary cultural projections?

Sceptics could still argue that we should apply Occam’s razor and just stick to words like distribution, constellations, configuration, objects, relations, assemblages, materiality, etc. There are at least three reasons why keeping ‘spatiality’ in our dictionary may be worthwhile, though. First, there is linguistic efficiency and communicative convenience to it: one word instead of several. Behind this efficiency is the intuitive utility of such everyday life concepts as ‘space’ or ‘place’ or ‘site’, as well as the distinctive scientific utility of derivative concepts. Second, it is sociologically essential to distinguish between perceptual and ontological levels of reality. Objects appear separate to us, but they can be aggregated into groups and they are also parts of greater wholes – a plant is part of an ecosystem, ecosystems form environments, environments form a biosphere, biosphere makes the planet ‘alive’, etc. At one end of this spectrum are our most general concepts. Space is one of them. Third, and perhaps most abstract, there are *emergent phenomena* associated with complex entwinement and aggregations of things: the qualities that are not reducible to a simple sum of ingredients, much less to any one element of the whole. There are collective multidimensional phenomena, such as human language, which are not reducible to what appears to be their constitutive parts or individual users. They are relational phenomena that can be said to ‘supervene’ on a variety of embedded connections or to ‘emerge out’ of a set of observable relationships. Space in our conception is such an entity.

These emergent entities are reducible neither to the form of discrete palpable ‘objects’ nor to purely mental ‘constructs’ or psychological ‘contents’. There are not many viable templates to consider the so-conceived phenomenon of emergence. Yet it is this very in-betweenness where emergence is presumed to ‘take place’ and where its meaningfulness resides. For example, D.W. Winnicott’s prominent psychoanalytical conception of the “location of cultural experience” sees it as

emerging in what he calls the “potential space” or “third space” (Winnicott 2005: 135). Cultural sociologists working within the material turn noticed and tested this conception in explanations of various patterns of cultural consumption and production. Ian Woodward (2011: 366) showed that Winnicott’s approach “usefully suggests pathways for developing a model of consumption which neither reduces person–object exchanges to the psyche and assemblages of practices, or to the dead hand of social-structural forces”. While the study does not talk about space as such, but only about object relations, this sociological application is compatible with one strand of our considerations regarding space as the relational arrangement of social goods with emergent effects. Space understood sociologically as relational distribution of clusters of affordances or as the array of material ecologies that ‘nest’ cultural experiences can also be considered along those theoretical lines. Like ‘class’, ‘society’, ‘modernity’ or ‘structure’, space in social sciences is a general composite term that has no simple ostensive definition but is nevertheless knowable through its correlative effects and affordances: distances, perspectives, relations, dimensions, positionalities, sites, effects, figurations, atmospheres, etc. It points to an aggregated level of the entwinements between objects of various kinds and scales.

From this point of view, space consists of a multiplicity of arrangements and relational configurations that permeate each other and yet can and should be analytically distinguished. Such a modern sociological understanding is expandable to and potentially combinable with other traditional ideas. For example, Jane Bennett evokes the idea of the *Shi*, prominent in Chinese philosophy, to make graspable this specific quality bound to spatiotemporal configurations.

‘*Shi* is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory, or *élan* inherent to a specific arrangement of things. Originally a word used in military strategy – a good general must be able to read and then ride the *shi* of a configuration of moods, winds, historical trends, and armaments – *shi* names the dynamic force emanating from a spatiotemporal configuration rather than from any element within it.’

(Bennett 2005: 461)

Similarly, the Japanese concept of *ma* – the space in between – comes to mind in this context. As Arata Isozaki writes,

‘*ma* is all the following: a slit, a distance, a crack, a difference, a split, a disposition, a boundary, a pause, a dispersion, a blank, a vacuum. One can say that its function is infinitely close to Derrida’s *espacement* = becoming of space’.

(Isozaki and Asada 2010: 5)

There are, of course, more examples of this mode of spatial thinking in contemporary social sciences, for example the concept of ‘urban interstices’ as sites of social critique (Brighenti 2013). The task is to connect the dots and raise awareness regarding the implicit and explicit roles that space does and can play in our thinking.

Benefit III – Current Urgency

In addition to these conceptual considerations, a spatial approach may also be fruitful given the most recent empirical reorientations. Such a shift seems even more urgent now as social reality is getting transformed many times over as we speak, quite literally so. Among the key processes of transformation today we recognize the ever-deeper mediatization and accelerated trans-localization of social life. Augmented by the new ontologies of the virtual, the actual physical sites of social life are being profoundly reconstituted, whereby space, time and society are brought to a radically new conjunction, pushing ‘late modernity’ to its limits. This is, of course, not new. Already in the 1990s, Anthony Giddens (1994) observed that “analyzing the conjunctions of time, space and modernity requires conceptual as well as substantive reorientation in social thought and research”. We concur. Many societies have been at such a crossroads for quite some time now. Thus, a collective effort to codify the relevant formulations is in order – a ‘refiguration’ of social thought that dovetails the diagnosis of a ‘refiguration’ of social life.

When 27 years later Anthony Giddens gave a lecture from London to the members of our research centre in Berlin via Zoom in May 2021, we could not help reflecting that this occasion underlined yet another newly refigured conjunction of time, space and modernity. We were reflecting on the fact that if you can do your job from *anywhere*, this means your peers from *anywhere* may do it; we were pondering the challenges of ‘globotics’ – the fusion of globalization and robotics – and its potential to displace service workers *en masse* around the world; we were discussing the effects of the lockdown measures in the time of pandemic; we were considering massive geographical and social changes implicated in climate changes. It was clear that all those phenomena have significant spatial dimensions and non-trivial spatial ramifications. Suddenly, space seemed more urgent a consideration than it had been only a decade ago, when the spatial turn already sensitized researchers to the topic. Spatiality of social life, and spatiality of life generally, seems now inseparable from major problems of our time such as climate change, wars, state-backed settlers movements, military occupation of contested territories, surveillance capitalism and global biopolitical challenges such as worldwide pandemics. From relatively old critical themes to relatively fresh problems, space re-enters explanatory efforts as an indispensable factor. The seemingly de-territorializing effects of digitalization are clearly in need of new systematic clarification. As the development of smart cities indicates, localizing new digitalities and datafying new spatialities are among the key ways of reproducing social structures, reframing inequities and fabricating new forms of power (Bartmanski et al. 2022). In short, space is an urgent matter, both theoretically and empirically.

Structure of the Volume

Given those conceptual considerations, the specific ontological qualities of the spatial and the rapid transformation of the scales of current socio-political issues, the following collection brings together a set of essays that reflect on the multifaceted character of space in social life and aim at fleshing out new research vocabularies. In

short, we wish to offer a new discursive space for a transdisciplinary investigation of the spatiality of the social. As insisted repeatedly above, we share the Lefebvrian scepticism regarding the attempt to develop a systematic ‘science of space’. There are good reasons to refrain from searching for a clear-cut or comprehensive thematization of space as a separate field. Instead, the contributions in this volume illustrate a range of analytical and synthetic benefits of thinking the social out of the spatial through a variety of examples. The broad bracket of ‘considering space’ that is binding the following collection of essays together, is surprisingly functional in this regard. The divergence of understandings and perspectives, an indispensable part of edited volumes and the way their production is organized, is a welcomed feature this time. There are three central conversations around which the structure of the volume is organized – hence the book’s division into three substantive parts.

The first section – *Considering Space in Social Theory* – presents several suggestions on how to engage the spatial as a heuristic in theorizing and understanding the social. In the first contribution to this section, Martina Löw asks what it takes to *understand* space as a sociological phenomenon. She goes back to the Weberian category of ‘*Verstehen*’ (interpretive understanding) and recalls the core premise for the research agenda of ‘Refiguration of Space’ which is also one of the assumptions behind this volume: examining the current social condition through the lens of its spatial formations yields a uniquely valuable sociological angle. As Löw argues the concept of *refiguration* can serve as a particularly useful heuristic, especially if understood in a multidimensional relational way. She explains why social theory proved unable or unwilling to consider space as a systematic part of its explanations and points to some key benefits of relational thinking about space. The subsequent contributions in this section follow the stipulation to take the spatial as a point of departure for understanding the social. Each demonstrates the potential of this approach for refining and rethinking several strands of social theory.

Foregrounding space and refigurations of space allow Angelika Poferl to rethink Ulrich Beck’s theory of reflexive modernization. To come to terms with a globalizing social condition demands a departure from categorical abstractions and instead a more situational, local approach and to acknowledge the manifold embeddedness of subjects. Strengthening space as an underdeveloped category in reflexive modernization theory allows Poferl to formulate her own proposal of a ‘cosmopolitics of the social’, illustrating the relationship between space and gender. Space can also be a tool for refining an understanding of the conceptual development of philosophical thought as Nana Last demonstrates. Her innovative explanation of how and why Wittgenstein radically shifted his views is rooted in the interpretation of the significance of his one-time architectural endeavour. Architectural conceptions, spatial experiences and his work on interior design provide additional doorways into Wittgenstein’s ‘second’ philosophical edifice. Henning Füller adds another angle to this use of space as a heuristic for rethinking social theory. A specific quality of the spatial is the aspect of topology, i.e. the structural quality of connections and shapes. This quality of space can be taken as helpful guidance to enhance current proposals to assume a relational ontology of

the social world. Current assemblage theories or similar attempts to formulate less dualistic conceptions of human and non-human in social theory could be made more context-aware and power-oriented through a topological approach. Günter Weidenhaus both closes the circle of the first section and establishes the bridge to the following section. He again engages with current theories of globalization and details how different assumptions of the spatial constitution of the global are at play. A territorial differentiated world has been first replaced with the imagination of a 'smooth' and homogenous space of globalization in such theories, and this image is increasingly fragmented along differing lines again.

Epistemological considerations are underlying the volume as a whole and are made explicit in several of its contributions. The second section – *Considering Space in Global Epistemologies* – emphasizes the problem of the historical contingencies of conceptions of space itself. Far from being a universal part of the 'world of ideas', especially when used in social theory, the concept is strongly influenced by cultural settings and historical contexts. Johanna Hoerning invites us to consider the often-unquestioned bifurcated spatial divisions. Dividing North vs. South or Urban vs. Rural – quasi-second nature in our approach to space – entails a powerful bias in its epistemological framework. Manuela Boatcă and Fabio Santos bring this sensitivity to the example of Europe. Common depictions of Europe do unwillingly entail a universalizing gesture, propagating an essentialist and occidental view of the world. Walter Mignolo sustains the scepticism regarding space as a neutral or universal concept with a fundamental argument. Like 'time' and 'society', 'space' also must be seen in its deep connection to specific traditions of semiotic world-making that becomes coded in specific languages and eventually forms a specific cosmology. Spatial categories show a double face here. On the one hand, spatialization often is a mode of hiding inequalities. The frequently taken-for-granted spatializations of Europe – e.g. 'East' and 'West' – as well as various similar spatializations of the world bear hidden forms of power and colonial thought. On the other hand, space can also inform critical social analysis and help to point out inequalities. The example of the caste system in India allows Sanjana Krishnan to point out this benefit of adding a spatial sensorium in social research.

The third section – *Considering Space in Meaning Making* – takes up the under-represented issue of the entwinement of spatiality and materiality and their joint efficacy in shaping social processes of meaning-making. As such, it expands epistemological considerations of the previous part by asking: What do we mean exactly when we say that space is influenced by 'cultural settings' and 'historical contexts'? Is relational experiential space a part of those very 'settings' and 'contexts', and if yes, then what's their mutual interdependence? What's the impact of the relationally understood spatial regimes on signifiatory practices and vice versa? If 'space' is culture- and time-dependent and subject to epistemological distortions and symbolic violence, then we must thematize the issue of *how* our sense of space gets constituted and refigured – both as a scientific category and an aspect of social life. How does 'meaning' as a central human phenomenon enter the equation of 'thinking the social out of the spatial'? Working with such foundational

questions, this section aims to explore new ways in which cultural sociologists could re-connect epistemological and ontological considerations. By reflecting on how spatiality and cultural meaning are implicated in each other, this section aims to trace a series of pathways of their reciprocal conditioning in everyday life.

In his chapter, Dominik Bartmanski investigates the interdependence between a relational conception of space and non-representational aspects of meaning-making in practices of cultural production. The relationship between space and culture may have seemed to be a kind of ‘dangerous liaison’ as far as the language-based, constructivist social theories were concerned, but there are productive ways out of the perceived impasse. Bartmanski revisits the long-neglected yet vibrant phenomenological foundations of cultural and spatial analysis, especially Merleau-Ponty’s conception of body in space, and applies a new understanding of space to the phenomenon of the ‘music scene’. Reducible neither to the ‘built environment’ and objects considered as props of action, nor to the intentionality of its individual human members, any music scene worth its name – and any consolidated ‘art world’ more generally – can be better grasped in its meaningful potential as a space of cultural experience. Such a space is a conjuncture of motivated experiential potentialities rather than linear material determinisms, an ecology of the “distribution of the sensible” (Ranciere 2013), not just the arbitrary attribution of signification. Kelcie Vercel and Terence McDonnell develop a similar theme when they adopt a cultural sociological perspective to further elucidate the role of settings, object affordances and space in meaning-making. They argue that space understood as the arrangement of objects in an environment is not reducible to mere situational ‘cues’ for human action. Rather, it enables sociological interpretations of the possible when it comes to the ecologies of objects and bodies. Pavel Pospech thematizes ‘locational meanings’ as a neglected aspect of cultural socialization and explains the benefits of re-introducing this conception to cultural analysis, thereby providing a fresh sociological perspective on what ‘location of culture’ can mean. In particular, he shows that the variability of meaning-making cannot be understood without reference to the question of how place structures human sociability. Finally, Letteria Fasari brings together a cultural sociological performance theory and a notion of space, aiming to reveal how meanings of loss and social disruption are at once inscribed in and shaped by spatial conditions. Here, loss of space can be construed as a constitutive negative of the social. She frames this issue as one in which space is a kind of ‘pre-condition’ of meaning-making, a fertile ground of interpretive appropriation rather than simply a screen onto which social values are projected.

Berlin, February 2022

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