

# Interpreting identities: Doreen Massey on politics, gender, and space-time<sup>\*</sup>

edited by MICHAEL HOYLER

## Globalisation, high technology, and geography<sup>1</sup>

*Doreen Massey:* I think it might be good to try and move between the museum and the themes that we are going to be talking about during the rest of this afternoon. There were three obvious things that occurred to me out of the museum. One was about globalisation itself. There's a question up there [on the board] that says 'globalisation, a child of our time?'. And one of the things that struck me when we were going around the museum, was that what we had there was the story of a very early internationalised manufacturing company, and I think sometimes the way we tell our current stories of globalisation, particularly perhaps in the popular press, it's seen as a really new phenomenon, as though it *just* happened, and particularly some of the so-called problems that we in the First World are facing are seen as *new* problems of globalisation, whereas in fact globalisation is quite an old phenomenon. It's older indeed than what we saw in the museum and if you lived in the Third World you'd have felt the impact of something like globalisation centuries ago. The kind of break-up of places that we bemoan today would have been felt in Third World countries at the beginnings of imperialism, the beginnings of even those so-called 'voyages of discovery'. When we talk about globalisation now, we use the word quite often to mean something quite specific, but we use it as though it's a very general, generic term. Maybe we ought to be more specific about what kind of globalisation it is we are experiencing at the moment, and maybe – in relation to the museum – about what is specific about it that would be different from what was going on in the days when that company [BASF] first expanded around the world in the way that it did. So that's one set of questions about the character of globalisation

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<sup>\*</sup> The following is a revised version of a transcript recounting some of the discussions between Doreen Massey and graduate students from German, Austrian and Swiss universities during three seminars held at the University of Heidelberg on the occasion of the Hettner-Lecture 1998. The italicised questions and contributions represent voices of different participants, sometimes in summarised form. Thanks are due to Tim Freytag for co-organising the seminars, and to Henning Banthien, Burkhard Remppis and Katharine Reynolds for helping us to structure and record the debates. A selection of important essays by Doreen Massey, which relate to many of the issues discussed, is available in Doreen Massey, *Space, place and gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>1</sup> *Villa Bosch*, Wednesday, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1998, 14.00 to 17.00. The event began with a visit to the recently opened *Carl Bosch Museum Heidelberg*, where representations of both the private and the working life of the Nobel laureate stimulated lively debates on questions of globalisation, science, nature/culture, and identity.

and the ways in which the people who get to tell the stories about it tell those stories that might be raised by the presentation in the museum.

The second set of stuff that really fascinated me was notions of science and the relation between culture and nature. The utter fascination that Bosch had for collecting knowledge – if he wasn't doing things with chemicals he was chasing butterflies and beetles, and when he got home at night and everybody else had gone to bed he went out and looked through a telescope and tried to find knowledge out about the stars. This is a high point of the period of the constitution of a certain form of Western taxonomic knowledge, and the relation between that and the construction of companies, the relation between nature and culture, and science and power, were issues which inevitably came out. There were some really wonderful little bits in some of the documents that we saw: the story of the accident in the early part of this century and how that was somehow due to nature – ‘damn it, got out of control again!’ –, and there's this whole thing about pinning nature down, literally in the case of the butterflies, and it relates to what we still do now and what is going on now, the kind of desire to organise the world and to think in some way that there is an order that we can conceive it through. So I'd like to put the whole nature/culture, power/knowledge set of axes on the agenda if we can. I think we should spend time on it because we are also part of it, as academics, and therefore it allows us a moment of self-reflection about what role we're playing in all that and how.

And I think that applies to the third set of questions that kind of threw themselves at you when you were in there. Gender is the subject for tomorrow but it was so evidently present in the exhibition in the museum that we should at least raise it today: the nature of the lives that were lived and in particular the construction – through that narrative and through the materiality of the lives as we got them told – of gendered identities that was going on there, how Bosch came to be and how he could be the kind of person that he was. The other thing is to think about the construction of identity through networks of interconnections. Bosch is a very good case of somebody who can only be what he is, what he was, because of relations with other people, and in this particular case they were mainly relations where he was in a relatively dominant position, but it would apply to anyone, it would apply to Mrs Bosch too. From what one could tell her prime role in life was being Mrs Bosch, so therefore it was again a question of relationality, but that way of thinking identity through relations seems to me absolutely clear in the way in which it was set up in the museum. And of course the relation between personal and public life, which is an issue for us too, and what happens if you become so fascinated with your work on the one hand or so pressured by the competitive requirements of being an academic who's going to survive, then what else can you afford to have in your life that isn't devoted to success along those terms. So I think both the second and the third issues are ones which perhaps require us to reflect on the way in which we live our

lives, and what that does to the structures – do we opt out of them, do we fight them –, as well as just thinking about ‘the world out there’ as though it’s something in which we don’t participate. So those three issues occurred to me as the main ones.

*In the context of the first issue you raised – globalisation – I wonder which empirical findings we could take as starting points for describing globalising trends and how do we discriminate between these empirical findings and the myth, the rhetoric, that goes along with the globalisation debate – what is your position on that?*

Doreen Massey: I feel very strongly about it actually, it’s one of the things I get most impassioned about in this area. So much of the academic debate is about ‘is it happening or isn’t it happening?’. There’s a book just appeared in Britain which has had quite a lot of international coverage, it’s by Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson and it’s called *Globalization in question*<sup>2</sup>, and it produces data to try and say, don’t let’s get too excited, a) it hasn’t happened yet, b) it’s not that different from 80 years ago, and it talks about all the parts of the world that are left out.

But I’d like to pick up on the other point you made which is about the discourses, because what I was trying to argue in the lecture on Monday<sup>3</sup> was precisely that. I think the dominant discourse of globalisation at the moment is a discourse which is organised by those in favour of a kind of free market globalisation – when we say globalisation now, we often assume it means free market globalisation, whereas actually globalisation could take on all kinds of different forms: cultures and people meeting up, having contact, all kinds of ways in which the world could get together, it’s not entirely clear that it should get together solely through ‘free global forces’. What I was arguing on Monday night is that it is an absolutely classic Foucauldian discourse, it’s a discourse which is *used* to justify things happening. It’s not a description of the world, it’s the kind of rhetoric that the IMF or Tony Blair or Bill Clinton use to justify the production of precisely the thing they pretend to describe. So just after Tony Blair got elected he came back from a meeting in Europe, I think at Amsterdam, with two great victories for the British people. The first one was that he had convinced, I think it was Kohl, about the importance, given that we had globalisation, of having flexible labour markets. Globalisation was taken as given, it was taken as an inevitability, and it was then used to justify the production of the conditions for actually having globalisation – in the same month Blair was signing up to a whole range of treaties which were producing precisely the conditions he was then responding to. So I think it is a *legitimizing* discourse of the first order and we

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in question: the international economy and the possibilities of governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Doreen Massey, ‘Imagining globalisation: power-geometries of time-space’, this volume, pp. 9-23.

should understand it like that, but it's also a very *specific* one, it isn't about something that we might call globalisation in general, it's about globalisation on very particular terms, for the benefit of very particular groups of people – and it could be otherwise. The second thing he brought back, having talked about the borderless world and the necessity therefore for the British economy to be competitive and therefore to have flexible labour markets, was a guarantee that we could defend our borders against alien immigrants. The contradiction is evident. But to say it's a rhetoric isn't to say it's not happening, it's the interplay between the material and the discursive that's at issue.

*Perhaps we lay too much stress upon trying to characterise globalisation in the West, whereas the important question may be more, how are local places around the world changing as a result of current global forces?*

*Doreen Massey:* Certainly within sociological and cultural studies in the UK the focus on globalisation that we have is an extraordinarily Western, a completely Eurocentric one, and that is true also of the ways in which people imagine globalisation is producing new problems. Those problems, as I said just before, have been experienced in far more grotesque ways over centuries in the Third World. The way in which we talk about globalisation now is a Western story in exactly the same way that we used to tell the story of modernity as 'Western world leads the world into progress' kind of story. It's provoked by problems here, it's told from the point of view of people here. That doesn't mean it's wrong, it means it's a partial story and we have to recognise its positionality.

So I think we ought to be sensitive to the fact that other stories of globalisation can be told, but I would have a wariness about making the distinction between globalisation on the one hand and local impacts on the other, as though there's two different spheres or two different levels, and that conceptualising globalisation is something totally divorced from the kind of socially concerned work of looking at local impacts. I think we can't afford to keep those separate. I don't think that a distinction between macro and micro if you like, between global and local, is a helpful one either analytically or in terms of politics. Globalisation isn't something that exists at some detached level, that isn't locally embedded – BASF *exists in Ludwigshafen*, which is extremely grounded, I went to see it on Sunday and it's definitely there! Globalisation doesn't float above the earth, it is operated by the same material, social, embedded processes of people in branch plants, in production factories, in research organisations, making decisions which may or may not work out all around the world, just in the same way as the devastation of local economies happens at a local level. The global is only something constructed out of very precariously constituted socially constructed networks of local connections. So I

think I'm very, very wary of making that distinction, particularly when it's seen as kind of more feminist or more socially concerned to look at the local. I would back off from that. I'm probably in a minority in doing that, but I'm very wary about that kind of distinction.

*But often the focus seems just to be on global processes; I think we should put a similar effort in trying to understand what is actually happening locally.*

*Doreen Massey:* On Monday night I gave a few statistics and I think the trouble is that at one level we know what's going on, that the inequality in the world is *massively* increasing and that there's no question that neo-liberal globalisation is devastating for large proportions of the world. It's almost a question of 'what do we do with that kind of knowledge?', that's one thing which I think is important.

I'm now talking about an English speaking literature, but one of the phenomena we have in the English literature is people doing a lot of local cultural studies, not so much economic but cultural studies, and they start off – before they go into the detail of their own work which will be modulated and nuanced and really carefully thought through and beautifully researched – they start off with a description of something they call 'globalisation' and it will be this chorus of, you know, there *is* twenty-four hour trading, there *is* the Internet, there *is* CNN, there *is* Coca-Cola – given that, then here is my research... And the trouble with that is, if you accept that picture, then you're not exploring the real reasons, the real power relations which are producing what's going on down here at the local level. You are saying 'these things are happening' and then 'isn't it awful in ... this corner of Chiapas', but actually these things are not just happening, *they are being produced*, and they are being produced by social forces with which at some level we can engage, because some of the social forces that are producing it are precisely our own governments for which we have voted or not, and societies within which we live and participate and apparently give some kind of consent. The more we say this is a project and not an inevitability and that it's a *highly specific project*, the more then it becomes available to contestation.

*What follows from this insight? I mean, what sort of agenda do you have for research, or for action, in the context of the globalisation debate rhetoric?*

*Doreen Massey:* Well, obviously one has different opportunities depending on where one is placed, but personally I've put a lot of effort into talking about those kinds of views. So I've just made a TV programme on globalisation, saying precisely this kind of thing, for Channel 4 in the UK. We have, three of us, set up a journal of politics and culture, 'Soundings', which comes out every four months, and we have in almost every issue something on globalisation. It's not a big journal, we have a thousand subscribers, it's probably read by five thousand people but we get articles from it in

newspapers; one does those little things. To some extent we started this journal because we found the more active forms of political involvement being very constrained and narrow at the time when we set it up, which was the early 1990s. Previous to that quite a few of us had worked in other ways politically outside of academic life, so I'd worked in the Greater London Council, I've worked in Nicaragua. Different moments present different kinds of possibilities for involvement. I don't think it's just what we do in our research, I think it's also how you link it up. There's something here about individual responsibilities and globalisation, and one of the questions you can always ask yourself as an academic is, how can you use the immense amount of access that we have to contacts and to knowledge, how do you take that outside the walls of academe?

*It seems to be necessary to tell a dualistic story to make globalisation work, to contrast for example free trade and protectionism – which of course never existed in that pure form, but the categories are used to promote specific projects, in other contexts it's male/female or nature/culture, you mentioned various contradictory geographical imaginations in your first lecture. On the other hand, don't you also establish a framework of polarities if you try to understand a phenomenon through a conceptualisation of interrelations?*

*Doreen Massey:* I don't think all dualisms are bad if they are just alternatives but the construction of global and local, and nature and culture, and masculine and feminine, are not just simple dualisms, they are not just two things that happen to exist. One is constructed as the *negative* of the other, they are constructed in thoroughly counterpositional ways, by the *exclusion* of the other. It's a negative thinking, it's the negative construction of the identity of the other as having the characteristics you want to expel from yourself. So the male constructs the female as absence of the good things that are masculine and as the kind of bearer of all the things that masculinity doesn't want to deal with like emotion and the body, and the same with nature and culture. All those dualisms are in certain ways extremely related to each other, and it seems to me that's an incredibly negative logic.

In order to talk in terms of relations you have to differentiate but differentiation doesn't mean negative counterposition. You can construct your identity by saying 'I am me because I'm not you and I am not x, y, z' or you can construct your identity by saying 'I am me because I am constructed in this position within a whole set of relations which means I have positive relations to you, I am me in part because of a positive interconnection with you who are different, I am not me because I am not you who are opposed' and so interrelational thinking is trying to think identities as positive constructions out of interrelations rather than the kind of Orientalist or nature/culture, masculine/feminine dualisms of counterposition which say what you are by asserting, pretending – because it's never really possible – what you are not.

Now, *completely* different politics have come out of those things, and there's been a big effort both amongst black struggles and feminist, to try and rethink identity in a way which is not about expelling things, but about recognising *connections*.

*Perhaps globalisation with all its inequalities is possible because we perceive events differently with changing social and physical distance. For example, if a forest is chopped down here, we are all emotionally affected, but if rain forests in vast amounts are cut down every day, we know it's not good for the ecosystem, but we are not really affected. Or think of a plane crash somewhere in Asia, well, you notice it on TV – but if the plane had come down near Heidelberg, filled with fellow-countrymen, you would be emotionally much more affected...*

*Doreen Massey:* Well first of all – is it so, is it true? There's an empirical question about whether we agree factually with what you are saying and we can have a debate about that. Obviously there are questions about diaspora communities, people in Leicester for example are very concerned when things happen in parts of the Indian subcontinent because their families are there, so the social and spatial are very mixed up and it becomes complicated, but there's also just the question about whether it's true.

Secondly is it *necessarily* so, even if it's empirically true now? Is that because that rhetoric of caring most for that which is closest is itself a construction? I mean, that's how the nation state gets imagined and constructed, and nationalism and patriotism get generated, that's how all this stuff about retreating into the individualised nuclear family is generated as the ideology 'of course you help your family first'. It seems to me it's such a politics of self-interest which makes internationalism virtually impossible. Now, my not liking it doesn't mean it's possible to say it's not true but I am, a) empirically sceptical and b) kind of politically, it's the politics of despair in some sense for me to think that way.

So for me one of the questions – and it is a question for people as geographers – is, how does one have an imagination of a solidarity which *isn't* about solely the local? I am sure that if you talked to the leaders of multinational companies, their notion of where their interests are is constructed through something completely different, it's neither local in the sense of space nor social in the sense that you meant, it's about precisely the networks of profit-making production. So we need to think what kinds of relations can we make people aware of that introduce the possibility of solidarity in some most general sense with those who are socially or spatially distant, what kinds of alternative geographies can you make available that allow people to see the connections with say the people in the outskirts of Latin American cities, because their lives and ours *are* intimately related. So can we construct geographies which have *affect*, actually produce somehow political understandings, touch some kind of

emotion that makes it possible not to care less because there weren't any British people on board that plane when it crashed?

*In a more abstract way it's the question whether we can overrule emotion by rational insight.*

*Doreen Massey:* But behind that way of rephrasing it is an assumption of the necessity of a geography of emotion, which is that the emotion is always more positive and stronger when it's closer and that's where I don't know if it's true and I certainly don't know if it's necessarily true. I mean the women's movement is international. It is possible to construct sets of relations which aren't simply social in the local sense which you meant. There is now, for instance, a globalisation of organisations of indigenous people. So I don't think we're limited in quite the way you are talking about and I don't think it's a question of rationality versus emotion. It's a very real problem that you raise.

*I agree that solidarity is not necessarily a matter of physical distance but rather a product of social relations. And these are often more intensive within local communities.*

*Doreen Massey:* Some of Iris Marion Young's critique of community and especially of local community is precisely around that distinction between authentic/local – inauthentic/long distance, about localness and distance and the potential degrees of solidarity or connection. She talks about a notion of 'unassimilated otherness', a relation to those who are different but whom you don't try to assimilate into your world. You just recognise the right to exist as different. She's talking in particular about cities, multi-ethnic cities for instance, and the ability to co-exist without having necessarily to integrally interact with the other. This is a position of simple toleration, of mutual toleration if you like, and that can be at a local level, so you get social otherness right at a local level, communities within a city for example.

The argument against that is put by people like Richard Sennett who would argue that mutual toleration isn't enough, we need to interact. His argument about the city in a book called *Flesh and stone*<sup>4</sup> for instance is an argument that our lives have become increasingly atomised – we drive around in cars, we live in nuclear families, we live a kind of friction-free life, in the sense that we don't actually have to make our way down the street, we don't have to negotiate, we go to the supermarket and we don't even have to speak to anyone, you know, you get it off the shelf, you pass it through a machine and bang you're out, no social interaction – and he would argue unassimilated otherness is not enough, the simple non-interactive tolerance of the

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Sennett, *Flesh and stone: the body and the city in Western civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).



other isn't enough, we need to recognise the fact that actually we are interacting and actively to participate in that interaction.

I think my position is: it is impossible to interact with everything, so somehow one has to make choices about what kinds of interaction you're going to have, what kinds of interaction you're going to be responsible for. But I think those two positions are very, very interesting in terms of the beginnings of the debate that we've got here and might be useful to put on the agenda for people to look at in the future.

*I'd like to ask a question that's related to the second set of issues you raised, about nature/culture. If space is constructed through social relations, what role does the natural environment play in this conception? It's easy to understand that built-up space in cities, for example, is created through social interaction, but what's the role of the natural environment of a place, the sea or the mountains for example, in such a concept of space?*

*Doreen Massey:* This question about the natural environment is such a huge issue and it's really difficult to address, it obviously relates to the discussion about the nature/culture divide, or dualism, and the fact that even within geography we make that divide between human geography and physical geography. I think it's one of the issues that even if we consider ourselves to be solely human or social geographers we have to face in the next decades.

There is obviously a lot of stuff around, which doesn't answer your question but which relates to it, about the social construction of nature and the identity of place. I'm sure you have the same debates in the German literature about the social construction of precisely those attitudes to particular forms of natural environment – I mean here in Heidelberg, all the romantic painters used to come here and established a particular construction of the natural environment, and the generation of a set of identities around the woods and the forests and the castle which aren't intrinsic to the woods and the forests and the castle but which are social constructions of them. So one side of what you were raising is about that, that nature isn't simply some given out there. The construction of the identity of place will depend very much on the culturally changing social construction of nature, what we see it to be, what particular landscapes come to represent in particular cultures. Like the Lake District in British history, the role that it has played in various kind of poetic, artistic or social movements has varied dramatically: nature was a place of escape, nature was a place of threat, nature was a place of production, all of those had been dominant at different times and in different ways and for different classes, so that is one aspect of an answer.

There has been a very strong argument for a decade at least, probably longer, where our main theme has been to emphasise the social constructedness of everything – everything is a product of the social, whether it's nature, gender,

disability – and I think there is now in the debates that I know about quite a bit of a movement back, which is to say, yes, but there is also nature, yes, but there is also the body, and that an argument around social constructedness is insufficient to cope with the whole of what is going on, that if one is really wanting to bring back the body into debates, or nature, then one has somehow to take account of the materiality of that, which social constructivism in itself doesn't adequately do. People who know the feminist literature will know that when Judith Butler first wrote *Gender trouble*<sup>5</sup>, which was about social constructedness, one of the big founding statements of a particular kind of feminism, first of all it was a marvellous book, but then she got criticised for in a sense writing out the body entirely. So she wrote another book called *Bodies that matter*<sup>6</sup>, which doesn't exactly bring it back in, but is a movement in that kind of direction.

We had the same debate amongst people working within the area of disability. So people were arguing for a long time – you know, this is how debates move, you make debates because that's what's needed at the time – people in the disability area arguing, we're not disabled, it is society which disables us, disablement is socially constructed. If society were constructed for people who cannot see, are in wheelchairs, whatever, then we wouldn't be disabled because it's the way in which society assumes a norm, builds a society for that norm and then, of course, the people who don't fit it are 'disabled'. Like society builds a working life of nine to five seven days a week and then says women are unable to do it because women have other jobs to do. So you get blamed for your incapacity to fit into a system which has actually been designed for a norm which isn't you. I think that was a really powerful argument that was made by the people in disability studies. But then what they came back with and said was well, yes that's true, it is society which disables me, but actually there is another side to it which is that I'm quite often in pain. Social constructedness does not deal with the material reality of having your legs ache all the time. And the same arguments can be made around the material reality of nature or the material reality of other aspects of embodiedness.

*The thing with nature is perhaps a little bit different and I'm not sure whether the problem is that geographers fear to return to a kind of environmental determinism.*

*Doreen Massey:* I think that's right and I think that social constructivism became so powerful because we were so anxious to get away from that kind of thing in geography, to get away from environmental determinism, in feminism to get away from 'biology is destiny', and to be told that because one was of a particular physical

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

construction therefore there were necessary social consequences, and we rebelled against that. But simply to say that everything is only a product of the rhetoric is also not enough, and the question then becomes ‘how do you bring that back in?’.

This is not an answer at all, but one set of literature which I’ve now mentioned to a few people and it doesn’t seem to be yet something that is popular here, is actor network theory. The main person who started this literature is a French sociologist called Bruno Latour, and there’s a whole set of other people related to him. It relates also to the work of a feminist biologist, I think she’s more radical and better in many ways, called Donna Haraway. This work is trying to think in terms of relations and trying to bring into those relations things that we would not classically call social. So the nodes in those relations, the things which form the articulations of those social relations could be what we classically call ‘nature’ or they could be machines, could be a high technology product, but these things are seen as themselves constructed out of relations.

Just take a microphone, for example, and look at it as the product of a whole massive intersection of social relations, of relations between the microphone and other things, and all the networks that it took to make that thing, from the people who dug up the metals in the first place through to the people who did the advertising, through to the ways in which this particular brand of microphone came to be the one that got bought here, which was to do with all kinds of rhetorics of advertising and sales promotion and a million things, and to see it as the kind of materialised result of that network, a massive network, an impossibly complicated network, but also to see that it isn’t just a static thing as a node in that network, it also has its own effectivity, which is to say it isn’t just a product. What actor network theorists want to do is to talk about things as ‘actants’, to talk about things which have effects but which are not actors in the classic social way in which we think about them as having intentionality. So things can have effects without having intentionality to have effects. The existence of that microphone has effects, it’s going to affect what happens to the distribution of this seminar later and therefore affect other social relations, it’s going to get into other classrooms, it’s going to make more people hear what we all say – so certain debates will get promulgated a little bit further as a result of the physical existence of that result called the microphone and a whole other set of relations. The whole world can be seen as these occasional temporary manifestations, materialisations of sets of relations in which not only human things are active conveyors of relations.

It also means that one has to think of what actor network theorists tend to call ‘monsters’, but I’m not sure I like the term, Bruno Latour calls them ‘quasi-objects’: that there is – and whether this is new or not is open to debate – a complete intermixing of the human in the sense of the specifically social, the natural in the sense of the non-human animate or inanimate, and the machine meaning somehow

subsequently socially produced from nature. I have a piece of metal in my arm because after the third or fourth time I broke my wrist they decided to pin it together, so I'm already a hybrid in that sense. You're wearing spectacles, and of course our bodies are that other other, that nature which is the same as the woods and fields out there. So they would argue not only that objects other than human objects have effectivity but that very few objects would be *purely* nature, human or machinic, most things are quasi, most things are mixtures of everything.

Now I don't think that's an answer to your question about how to bring in the natural environment but it's clearly the beginning of a way of thinking which might enable us to make links across that divide and in fact stop it being a divide, in a sense begin to integrate in a much more thorough way, as well as breaking down, the conceptual dualism between nature and culture. If you did the two things at once then maybe you would get somewhere. I have my reservations about actor network theory because it can get very formalistic, but in the general approach I have a lot of sympathy at least with what it's trying to do.

*My question in this context is: what importance has the natural environment in the construction of identity?*

*Doreen Massey:* You see, I think this is a difference in intellectual traditions. I don't think that's an askable question because it's so general, it's a bit as though you're asking a question that you want to have answered in general for the whole of humanity, and I deeply resist that and that is part of the tradition I come from. So I couldn't ask that question, I wouldn't want it to be answered, because I don't want to have something called 'human nature'. I have a fundamental resistance to – I also have it to a lot of psychoanalytic literature – to empirical generalisations of that kind because I think everything is temporally and historically so specific. So you can only ask that question about certain groups and certain places at certain times and not about humanity in general.

*We are talking about 'nature' and 'environment' – on the one hand there are material things 'out there', a tree, for example, and on the other hand we have concepts about particular landscapes in our heads. How can we think the two together – is it all a problem of semiotics?*

*Doreen Massey:* It's not a problem, it's a necessary given, it's part of the way in which we interact in the world. I think perhaps one of the things that happened with the dominance of that kind of social constructivism – and I am still very much in that way of thinking, I'm not trying to go against it – it's as though there are two levels: there's a kind of 'thingness' out there and then there is our discourses. It's as though there's a mediation between culture and nature, between discourse and some hard

reality which we can never directly appropriate, because we always have to appropriate it through an imagination that we already have in some way discursively.

There's some really interesting work just beginning now by Lawrence Grossberg at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and he is trying to get away from the idea that our only means of having relationship with that tree say, or with that landscape, is a textual one or a discursive one or a semiotic one, because very material reactions – cutting it down, sitting down under it, using the fruit from it, theorising about it – all of those are *also* part of the sets of social relations which connect us and the tree, us and the thingness of nature out there. So it isn't just social construction in the sense that discourse does it; it's social construction in the sense that – like 'every step you take, every move you make' – you are making relations *with* the rest of the world and in that sense theory is just another way of going on, another way of getting by in the world and constructing those relations, is just another way of existing in it all. And that way of understanding it doesn't posit a clear separation between the discursive and the material, which I think can be quite debilitating in the end because that's when you get to the feeling: take any position you want.

## Identity – gender – space<sup>7</sup>

*Doreen Massey:* When we were in the museum yesterday, one of the most obvious themes was the question of the construction of the gendered identities of Carl Bosch and of the generally absent Mrs Bosch. What was going on in the very processes which were being reported was not actually just the construction of Mr Bosch as a male identity and Mrs Bosch as the classic female, but the construction of the categories male and female as well. I think that's quite important, that the assignation of identity isn't an assignation to already pre-given categories. Clearly, when you are talking about the construction of identities, there is a history of categories and there are categories already available, but any process of doing it is also already remaking, reformulating, pushing further, reconstituting in some way those categories themselves. So what was partly at issue in that museum was not only the construction of male and female in the sense of the content of what it is to be female, the content of what it is to be male in middle class society at that period, but also the very fact of male and female and the heterosexual relationship between them. The law which says 'you can be male, you can be female but you can't be both and you can't be neither', the very fact of the division between the two was partly what was up for grabs.

Now when we were talking about this, one of the things that came up was the history of feminism within geography, feminist geography, and a kind of reflection on the various ways in which at each stage categorisations have been challenged. So at the very beginning what we were all doing was challenging the assumption that the straight male was the universal body, the universal figure, the universal actor in the world, from which anybody else was an exception, the marked category as opposed to the unmarked category. What happened in the 70s and early 80s in Britain, and I don't know the timings here, was that a large number of feminists said no to that, and what got constructed was a geography which talked about women, and – reflecting back on that history – what a lot of feminist geographers did then was to build a feminist geography or a gender geography around a particular kind of woman. A lot of the early feminist geography was about the problems of women living with men in the suburbs having children and all the difficulties they ran into.

So even when we were already doing the first disaggregation of categories, we were disaggregating on very particular lines and they were still quite hard categories and quite a lot of us felt we didn't fit into that category either. 'How did they get themselves in this position, living in the suburbs with a bloke in the first place?' was a

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<sup>7</sup> *Villa Bosch*, Thursday, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1998, 10.00 to 16.00. Doreen Massey provided a short introductory statement that was followed by a joint interpretation of a sculpture by Jürgen Goertz. The subsequent discussion focussed on issues of identity and spatiality, with specific reference to queer theory and feminist geography.

question a lot of us asked at that point, and so what happened then was a further disaggregation and suddenly onto the agenda by the late 80s, the early 90s, come gay and lesbian issues around space and spatiality within geography, people like Gill Valentine for instance in the UK, David Bell, lots of people outside of geography but whose work was brought into geography. And in a sense that was yet more liberating but it was still a question of closed identities, so what was fundamentally at issue was not whether you simply fitted but the fact that what was still being produced was a kind of a categorisation. So if you wanted to say, yes I'm not a man, so I don't fit that category, I am a woman but I'm not *that kind of* a woman, you still had to come out as something, you had to say 'I do belong to this closed set, this category', and that produced within the gay and lesbian political movement, just as it had within the women's movement, a lot of unease about where people should fit, and who belonged to which community – if said you were bisexual maybe you couldn't fit anywhere.

That is where what has now developed within the US and the UK is of fantastic importance – and that is this question of queer theory. Queer used to be the derogatory term applied to people who were gay and lesbian, or not necessarily gay and lesbian but certainly who didn't sign up to the exclusively straight model of heterosexuality, and the argument now is to abandon bounded categories, not to have to belong to a community around which you can draw a line. You don't have to belong to a category which is defined by saying what it isn't, the only thing that it isn't is given, fixed, bounded, defined by counterposition.

I think that's fundamentally important in relation to all the debates about duality, about negative constructions of identity: that if we really mean it when we say identities are constructed relationally, then that is where you get. I think it's very, very easy to say yes, we construct identities relationally, but still end up with overeasy categories which don't really do the job. Queer theory is related to a whole host of other kinds of theorising, the intention of which is to keep theorising open. If it has intellectual antecedents it would be the late writings of Wittgenstein, it would be Foucault, it would be Nietzsche to some extent, Bergson too, but also an anti-categorical way of thinking – the philosophical approach that tries to refuse to be imprisoned in the option of either 'you are A' or 'you are not A', the one that tries to say 'no I refuse that logical death trap', there is another way of thinking about the world which opens up to being more than just 'something and its negativised opposite'. So queer theory is not something that as an approach remains entirely within theories which are around gender and identity, it is an approach which expands to the way in which we define any kind of identity, conceptualise any kind of object and I think that's a potentially major contribution.

Another point about queer identity or that stream of theorising is that you are not what you are, you are what you *do*. Identities are not defined by being already-

defined things which then go out into the world and operate; identities are the process of operation. Now, I wanted to relate that back to the construction of identity in terms of relations because the way we have been talking about it so far has focussed on the construction of identities through relations as though those were happening at a moment. What I'd like to add to that now is the fact that, just as I said about space, identities are never closed, they are never finished, they are always being produced, they are always provisional coherences, and the identity of things is in that very process of production – it comes out of poststructuralist thinking – the identity itself is movement, it is the process of becoming. So you are not something which then starts becoming but the very process of becoming is what you are, and that would apply to anything: the microphone, the table or whatever, though it's quite often a bit tougher really to get your head around what it would mean in those ways.

Now that's related back to a point I touched on in the second lecture,<sup>8</sup> which is trying to get away from Kant because I think separating space and time was severely detrimental to subsequent thinking and has left us with a legacy which is now a real mindbender to try and overcome. It's easy to say 'yes, we must think in terms of space-time' but actually doing it, really changing your head-set, so you think space-time, is very different from just writing out 'yes, we will think in n dimensions'. What it means is thinking of every object as a space-time, as a particular constellation, a becoming, and that relates to the third proposition I made in the lecture on Tuesday because it's precisely by thinking in terms of space-time that the future is always held open – what it's all about is the process of becoming.

*When we were talking about the statue we said that what was going on there was a mobilisation of certain dualisms: masculinity/high technology, femininity/sensitivity, for example. I wonder how one could conceptualise a queer identity?*

*Doreen Massey:* I think there are two things going on when we say queer theory. It's not only about gender, it's also about a much wider mode of theorising, about thinking 'identity is process'. So when we were talking about the connection to poststructuralism before, there was a strong line of argument that it's not just about rethinking gender categories, it's about rethinking the conceptualisation of any entity of any sort, that any entity is in itself a kind of time-space event. 'A thing is an event' would be the bottom line of it, and therefore identities are always being made. I think where it becomes difficult is that as soon as you do have categories you do fix. It may be inevitable that as soon as you represent, you are to some extent pinning down, even if the categories that you mobilise are ones which are trying to account

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<sup>8</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Philosophy and politics of spatiality: some considerations', this volume, pp. 27-42.



for movement and mobility, they are nonetheless static, that's the nature of this particular form of knowledge that we get through our heads.

So I don't think you can escape that one, but you can escape the nature of the categories that you use in relation to a mobile world. So when Deleuze and Guattari say – particularly in the book *A thousand plateaus*<sup>9</sup>, which I think is highly productive – that nothing is a thing, a static, eternal thing, everything is a becoming, their key word is *becoming* – and there are many previous philosophers, Spinoza for example, it's got a long history, it's not simply a recent invention in Paris – it is still a mode of conceptualisation and it still does to some extent pin down, but it is trying completely to rethink the way in which identities or entities in the most general of senses are conceptualised.

When we talked about actor network theory yesterday and we talked about this microphone, we got as far as saying that it was the product of massive sets of interrelations, it would be an actant and it would have its own effectivity by making it possible for our discussions to go somewhere else. So it's an active thing, utterly embedded in sets of relations before now and in the future. Poststructuralism and queer theory would see that as an entity which is itself always in motion, always changing, and that the change itself is part of it. So, when you are wanting to bring back into your work questions of the body for instance, and a lot of the work done around the body is precisely about its unfixity and its openness, there is that level of provisionality and constructedness and the need for things actually to be maintained, that the body isn't a static thing, it is constantly becoming, it is constantly inevitably changing. It's easier to see with an organic concept maybe, than it is with a microphone.

*But even if everything is movement and always changing, just for defining something in a certain moment we probably need some kind of categories. In the creation of identity it's perhaps not that you say 'I am in this category' but rather the negative 'I don't belong to that category'.*

*Doreen Massey:* I do disagree with that, quite strongly. I don't think categories have to be constructed in that way. Edward Said's work on explicating Orientalism was about that kind of defining of identity which is very common, so the West defines itself by abjecting characteristics on to the other, in this case the Orient, and saying, not only does that help us to define the Orient but it enables us to construct the positive characteristics that we wish to have and to bury in some way the characteristics we don't want to have. We are the West because we are *not* the Orient, and that happens too with 'this is culture because it is *not* nature', it happens with 'this is rationality because it is *not* emotion', it happens with 'this is male because

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<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) (first published in French, 1980).

it is *not* female' and the kind of hierarchical relations between those oppositional identity constructions are evident. Now this is where there is a huge debate, and I think Edward Said is right: that's what happened at a period during the 19th century in the construction of an imaginative geography which 'orientalised' a particular part of the world. But I don't think that every construction of identity has to follow that oppositional abjecting form. The people who think that not only did that historically happen and that it's a characteristic of Western philosophy, ground it largely in a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to the world, that somehow it is a human necessity to think in terms of identities as being defined by what they are not, I am me because I am not you. I disagree with that, and most of the theories that I've been talking about would disagree with that.

What we are disagreeing with in the construction of Orientalism is not just that the Orient started looking rather nasty and negative and inferior, but the very mode of construction of identity itself by the abjection of characteristics that we don't want to have ourselves. So it's the whole process of the counterpositional construction of identity which is at issue. If we stick for the moment to categories of gender: I want to be female not because I'm not male, I want to be me because I have a positive relationship with everybody here, not because I am not everybody here. So I am constructed at the intersection of positive sets of relations: I am daughter, sister, friend, lecturer, fan of Liverpool Football Club, whatever you like, but a set of characteristics which is unique because of its construction as the intersection of all those relations, and which changes over time (that's the becoming thing) but not because I'm not an Everton fan or not because I am not black or not ... endlessly *not* things. The uniqueness comes from the positivity of the intersections, not from the rejection of the other.

And, you see, the construction of identity negatively is a way of refusing to recognise your relations. So the politics of the construction of the Orient as Orientalism was a politics of saying the West is this, the Orient is that, they are not like that because of the relations between them, they just are essentially like that, the Orient is this place with these characteristics, these sensualities, these cultural characteristics etc., and there are two things about that: one is that it's talking about static characterisations, so these are authenticities in some sense, they are given, but also that it kind of obliterates what Judith Butler calls the 'map of power'. By seeing them as real authenticities it is refusing to admit that the Orient got constructed like that precisely through an interrelationship with the West, and so what Butler is arguing for is that we've got to expose the maps of power through which our identities are constructed – they are positive constructions, I am me because of all the relationships I have. So the first thing to do is recognise that, but then we also have to take responsibility for it because not all those relationships will be egalitarian, positive, nice, and so there are some relations like the fact that I'm relatively

privileged, like the fact that I'm white, out of which my particularity emerges, for which I need to take some responsibility because I'm benefiting at other people's expense. I'm existing in a relation of power within which I'm in relative dominance, my lifestyle depends on the degradation of others in other parts of the world. That applies to all of us here, and so the first step is to refuse negative identity, to recognise the sets of interconnections within which you are constructed, which is Butler's 'exposing the map of power', but then to say, now let's examine it politically, what are those relations through which this particularity is constructed?

*In your research on high technology, the mostly male managers that you interviewed all had a very specific way of life and they emphasised very much their work. You pointed out in your articles that this is a very male way of living and, just as you said that we construct male and female gender categories, I wonder if we also construct high technology identities, identities which are in a way beyond gender, because I would argue that female managers have quite a similar lifestyle to those male managers.*

*Doreen Massey:* I take what you are trying to do but that is gendered itself. The very construction of being a scientist is gendered, so to say that being a scientist is more important than being gendered doesn't work, I think, because the construction of them as scientists is already gendered. It doesn't mean that they are empirically men or women but that the notion of scientificity with which these guys were struggling – and some of them liked it, some of them hated it, some of them were fighting it – was a notion which itself was constructed in relation to some of the grand dualisms, like rationality/emotion. How – in the construction of their own identities – they could talk excitedly about the science that they were doing, but pretend not to be able to do the housework. It was actually quite important for them to denigrate other sides of life. There's this series on British television called 'Dr Who': he's some brilliant scientist, an old guy, the iconic image of Einstein, and when he's on television we know he's a brilliant scientist for two reasons: partly because he's the only one that can solve all the scientific problems, he's the only one who can get this machine, the Tardis, to move through time and space, but the other reason is that you would never ask him to do the washing up, you would never ask him to mend a pair of trousers. In other words, the guy proves his positive identity as a scientist by his rejection of his ability to do other things, so it is precisely one of these negativised identities. 'I must be a good scientist because I am totally incapable in the kitchen' – we have all come across people who act like this, we live around them all the time, and spatiality is utterly important in this.

The spaces within which the scientists I interviewed worked were absolutely cleared of things that weren't about that notion of what to be a scientist was. There weren't bags of shopping; you know, you go into most work places and there are

plastic bags full of the groceries, messy places. These scientific places were not like that – they were quite explicitly devoted to being work places, they were temples to logic, temples to scientificity. There's a line of continuation, from all-male monasteries where the legitimised producers of knowledge hold themselves up away from the world, to all-male universities, where the next generations of all-male producers of knowledge had their spaces which were spaces removed from the world – the production of knowledge was precisely through a process of abstraction, which was mirrored in a spatial differentiation between the place of production of knowledge – which was legitimised as such – and the world outside. I have no idea whether it's true more generally but the scientific workplaces that I went into during the course of that research reminded me of monasteries in that sense, they were quite explicitly designed to be separate from a wider engagement with the world through other senses. Forms of knowledge that come through other things than intellectual rationality are expelled through that notion of knowledge as distancing, as abstraction, so I don't think we can separate being a scientist from how we think about scientificity, how we think about what knowledge is, and that itself is gendered in some fairly deep ways.

*This idea of identities being in constant flux could be put on a collision course in a way with the everyday representation of people's identities. In everyday life it is important to see identity as in a state of stasis, it's highly functional, it helps us to live in conflicting situations with a sort of image of stability, a psychological hold. If that is correct and if your conceptual proposal is also correct then how can we bridge the gap? Is the idea of identities as constantly changing not really a normative setting or can it be brought into line with empirical findings of people's very often fixed ideas of their own and other people's identities?*

*Doreen Massey:* But if all we did as scientists was to replicate everyday conceptualisations, for what? I think what we can do is to recognise the everyday conceptualisations, common sense, recognise its importance – but our role is to be critical, to ask the questions that you don't have time to ask in everyday life. That's one of the things that scientists do, and to challenge the categories that we have come too easily to accept. The best questions you can ask are the ones that challenge the most self-evident things, the things we take for granted so easily, and that's precisely the differentia specifica of being in the luxurious position of an intellectual: a kind of critical engagement with society. It's normative in the sense that one is doing it for a purpose, there are moments when everyday conceptions of identity as static may be absolutely not something we want to challenge; you can build a bridge with Newtonian mechanics, you don't need relativity theory. Maybe that's true of many of the same kinds of conceptualisations within the social, but there are moments when that way of conceptualising things may be thought by us to be a

blockage to change, a blockage to the reformulation of questions, when for instance appeals to the identity of place are made precisely on the basis of a stasis, of an authenticity, of a 'Kosovo is this ...' – that eternity of identity which is not mixed, which is not shifting, which has an appeal to some mythical past – then we might want to say, well actually no, there are other ways of thinking about identity, as unfinished, as interrelational, which would allow one to have access to that question, to formulate that question in a way which is answerable. That's part of our job.

*And it's to do with the role of science, of how far the role of science is to hold up a mirror to society. I think that's a fundamental ethical question because we tend to put ourselves into the position of 'we know better than others'.*

*Doreen Massey:* I don't think that's implied at all. Knowledge is not a mirror, there is no possibility of mirroring the world. There's whole philosophical critiques of the notion of knowledge as mirror. It is necessarily some kind of on-going construction.

'We know better': I don't think that's the issue either. What an intellectual access to the real gives you is a particular form of understanding, it isn't the only form of understanding. A doctor's understanding of you with your broken leg is one thing, your understanding of it through feeling in agony is another kind of understanding of it, the person who has to look after you as the nurse has another kind of understanding of it. What we have as those who deal with the intellect as the mode of access to understanding the real is a particular form of access. So it's not simply saying it's better, it's not simply saying it replaces every other form of understanding or other appropriation of reality, it is saying, look, given the kinds of specialisms we have, the time we have had to do it and the skills with which we have been trained and are able to work, then one can say these things. It doesn't mean it's eternally true, it means here you have a lever to open up a set of questions in a different way from the way in which concurrent dominant conceptualisations are enabling you to do it, and therefore other things you get access to, but it doesn't mean that you necessarily have to claim eternal truth.

*You've talked about identities as always becoming, always moving. But surely there's a limit to changing one's identity?*

*Doreen Massey:* Perhaps one of the key classic terms in the identity debate is performativity, the notion of performance, and the repetition of performance being a kind of gradual materialisation, establishment of more dominant, more important aspects of identity. It's through repetition that elements of identity get concretised, established, have longevity, but one criticism that's been made of performativity is that, precisely your point, you can't go out and perform being anything.

One of the critiques that's been made about cyborg identities is that somehow it makes us think we can be anything. It would be good to develop this way of thinking but without implying some kind of free voluntarism. This is where the critique by people like Susan Bordo have been so important in saying, no it is relational, it is about performance, but those performances are performances already constrained by, partly constructed through, previous experience, real possibilities, enablements that we have, impossibilities which we face. We cannot suddenly become something else, absolutely not. So there are some identities we can't have – by tomorrow it will be difficult for me to have adopted the identity of a nuclear physicist for example, and there are some identities that we perform that we don't believe in, but there are lots of identities that we have to suppress, and that's where I'm not so clear about how that relates to performativity.

When we went through the list of identities that were acceptable within geography, a lot of people were suppressing elements of their identities because they weren't quite reflected in the debates for instance, or there have been many social occasions on which you decide not to say exactly what you think, or decide not to come clean on what you really are, because it's not worth the effort or you'll get trampled on or it will get blocked, and so you suppress certain elements of identity.

*There's a debate in cultural anthropology about the integration of foreigners into Western societies, whether a multicultural perspective, a desire to integrate and interrelate, deprives people from other cultures of their identity because the power-geometry is not balanced. Perhaps we should discuss this aspect of power within the thinking about identity a little bit more.*

*Doreen Massey:* Obviously I agree that this is the point about not only recognising relations but also challenging them, looking at the power that is within them. I think there is a serious question that we haven't discussed at all and that is a kind of antagonism to a liberal multiculturalism for instance, the imperialism of trying to pretend you can include everybody, that's the kind of claustrophobia of a 'everything is related to everything else' kind of position. Part of the respect for the other is allowing them their own autonomy and not trying to draw them in too tightly to your own. That's my point about multiplicities, that these are genuinely different trajectories, genuinely or at least potentially other stories. In the end maybe that gap cannot be crossed; that is real alterity.

There's something that makes me very nervous about some of the academic work that's done at the moment. I would never want to argue that one should only study the kind of people that one already is oneself, you know, women study women and you divide yourself into already-given categories and you study that thing. I would never want to argue that, but there's a counter-tendency at the moment which I find very irritating in Britain and America, which is people gaining an academic kudos out

of studying exotics in some way, going for the furthest-out category you can possibly imagine and studying it, somehow adding to your own interestingness, whereas actually you are a dead straight boring academic living an extremely conventional life, but you decide to get out to study female-to-male trans-genders – and I find that imperialising, I think it's kind of making an academic name out of studying the other in a way which is voyeuristic.

I have fierce rows with some folk at home about what we do and one of the options that has to be allowed to people is that they *don't* get represented by academe in some way. Spivak makes this point, that we shouldn't necessarily assume that we go in and 'isn't it wonderful, we can let them speak'. So there are real political questions that have to be asked about that before it is assumable that it is right for us to bring people in in that way, either politically through liberal multiculturalism or academically through writing about people in that way. That's part of what I mean by real multiplicity. It's a real relative autonomy, a real otherness that cannot ever be fully appropriated, and you've got to recognise that.

*I'm just wondering about the picture that comes up with the process of making differences – nobody actually tells where the difference comes from. I mean there has to be some touching point that starts the differentiation. If you extend the notion of relationship that wide that otherness is within the difference, then it's not 'other'. If you talk about relationship as being something positive in itself, you are actually talking about a new kind of essence. I think that's very dangerous because that's killing otherness, and I'd agree that relation has to be a process of differentiation.*

*Doreen Massey:* Really good points, I mean I agree entirely about the otherness point and it relates back to what we were discussing before about the need to recognise the potential for absolute alterity. In some ways that goes back to the point we were making about Iris Marion Young when we were talking about 'unassimilated otherness', partly that otherness is unassimilable but also that it may be that with which we have to live. It also links up with discussions coming from Giddens and the debate we had about whether immediacy is any more authentic than a distanced interaction, and what I would argue from that is, that there is no 'unmediated' interaction, and if there isn't any unmediated interaction then there must be real difference. The most fundamental level of my response to what you said would be, that, yes, otherness is implicit in multiplicity. I think we'd probably find a way of agreeing at this point, because once you've got multiplicity you cannot simply appropriate the other because the very fact of separate existence implies a mediation. You can only exist through the interaction, so at that level I would want to steer a different path through the argument you made.

However, there's another way in which I agree with what you are saying and which I think it is quite important to stress. I do think of making relations as a process of

differentiation, I don't think you can get change without the interaction of differences. But one of the critiques that's sometimes made of Foucault, because of the same kinds of conceptualisations, one of the critiques that's sometimes made of actor network theory, is that you can get to a level of the analysis of the detail of the interactions where you miss the big differentiations, the structures of the differentiations. What Foucault does is talk about micro-powers and micro-politics and micro-relations, and one of the critiques is: that stops us talking about things like imperialism or sexist relations, structures of patriarchy, because we are constantly at that level of the micro, and maybe when you're saying you want to retain a notion of real big differences but without having counterpositional dualities as the structuring of those real big differences, what we can say is, yes, because there are structuring inequalities or differences which aren't structured in the sense of those dualities. So there are big structures in the power relations which are part of crucial differentiations, but they're not necessarily – or we must perhaps actively work that they won't be – understood in terms of negative counterposition and dualisms, maybe that's where we could engage.



## Theory and practice in geographical research<sup>10</sup>

*Doreen Massey:* The way some people are posing that question about research here, seems to me to be one in which it would rarely be posed in Britain. I think there is a real cultural difference in the way we do intellectual work which is worth discussing. I find it to some extent frustrating when people say ‘well, that’s theory – how do I apply it?’, because I don’t derive any theory without doing ‘real world’ actual studies. All I’ve ever learned or invented or written as new, which has been philosophical, conceptual or intellectual has come through addressing actual issues, whether it’s about globalisation, or the work about *Rethinking the region*<sup>11</sup> or whatever. The latter arose for very practical reasons of doing regional geography within the UK and being dissatisfied with the way in which the region was currently thought about.

‘Rethinking the region’ is at one level an empirical case study of a region, it’s about the south east of England during the 1980s. But it can’t take the region as given because that region in the 1980s was constructed as the south east, a particular south east as emblematic of the success of the Thatcherite project for instance, with very specific kinds of relations within it and relations beyond it. So the first two chapters of the book are entirely taken up with thinking ‘what is the south east’. One of them is ‘When was the south east?’, and the other one is ‘Where is the south east?’. Because what was constructed in the 1980s was a south east which was a set of relations which existed in relation to other places, and that becomes important if you are thinking about regions in a European context or in terms of regional inequality. We were collecting data but we were also *at the same time* asking what we meant by the most basic words that we were using. It’s harder to do, you do need a social context to do that and we were very lucky that it was a group of us doing it. That’s what I think of as theorising. I don’t think of theory as being another sphere up there where we talk about great names and perform our knowledge of certain kinds of things. Theory is a tool kit and if you think you are doing empirical work without it you’re kidding yourself, and the best way to do empirical work for me is to use it as a vehicle for also doing conceptualisation.

So theorising isn’t a question of sitting in the desert and speculating and it certainly isn’t a question of reading great theories from outside of geography and simply importing them into the subject. It’s a matter of using concepts where they are helpful to open up questions in ways which are more constructive, or making them available to different kinds of approaches. So the notion that on the one hand there is some kind of thing called ‘sophisticated speculative theory’ and on the other there

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<sup>10</sup> *Villa Bosch*, Friday, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1998, 10.00 to 16.00. The seminar started with a debate about the importance of theoretical conceptualisation in geographical research – should geography keep *both* feet on the (empirical) ground?

<sup>11</sup> John Allen, Doreen Massey and Allan Cochrane, *Rethinking the region* (London: Routledge, 1998).

is 'collecting data' I find an extremely destructive way of thinking about research. When you are collecting your data, you have to think what categories you're going to use. As soon as you start thinking what categories you're going to use, you're into conceptualisation and by that you are therefore placing yourself within a particular theoretical field, and if you don't think what categories you're going to use, then don't collect the data, because you won't really know what you're doing. I feel this very, very strongly and I'd like to hear back from you why it is that there's this feeling that you have two completely different spheres: a sophisticated performance of theory and then something you do with numbers, this notion of being 'on the ground' or 'concrete'. I think it is destructive to both sides: it makes theory into a performance and reduces the conceptual content of 'empirical' work.

*In contrast to many people who decide for one theory once and follow it all the rest of their lives, you first think about the topic and then consider what theory is best for studying it?*

Doreen Massey: I think I've got quite an easy-going relationship to theory in that sense, so I wouldn't want to say 'I'm a poststructuralist' for example, but on the other hand at the moment I'm finding one particular overall approach to imagining the world to be more productive than others.

But I don't think you can just pick and mix and I am not in favour of simple eclecticism. Perhaps what you are doing is constructing your own approach all the time, rather than becoming the child of some previously existing god. You're constructing your own approach for the problem that you're dealing with, and that's the fun of it.

*One of the dangers you could get into if you take ideas from different areas is to get a theory mix, that you don't have a justified viewpoint, you don't have a concept that actually pulls together what you are doing in one study.*

Doreen Massey: That's right. I wouldn't argue *at all* for a kind of cheerful innocent eclecticism. The only justification is really working through with things, pulling them into some kind of view which has a coherence. Inevitably there are going to be cracks in that and that's what you go on to do another time, you discover it as you're going along. For instance, there are certain aspects of what I used to use as a kind of Marxist analysis which have remained with me as absolutely consistent. For instance, the approach of thinking in terms of relations has remained. But other aspects of Marxist relationality, and particularly dialectical thinking in a very classic form, is absolutely inconsistent with my wider approach, so I couldn't bring that through into the way in which I think now.

*As soon as you leave the path of an established theory or paradigm, you really get into touchy issues. I don't see any good guidelines to handle those situations, guidelines which kind of steer you through and give you an idea of how to pull ideas together.*

*Doreen Massey:* One of the things I'd say is that you can't take a theory off the shelf and use it, or if you do, you're possibly not being sufficiently critical because it always runs into difficulties, always something is posed that's at an angle to it or that doesn't quite work, or that's conceptually inadequate, and then you're on your own. That's the good bit, you know: you don't necessarily want to go to the shelves and find 'oh, maybe Foucault will help me here'. Because you've probably read Foucault in the past, then maybe you find that's the kind of sets of theoretical concepts that you're drawing on. I think the most underestimated activity in the whole of academic work today is thinking, just really pushing yourself, really hard thinking. It doesn't take money, it doesn't take research funding, it takes time, and that's what's for me most at a premium.

For instance, at a collective level we are producing a new course on cities at the Open University. It came out of long discussions. The basis was, coming up to the new millennium, that for the first time ever over half the world would be living in megacities, which are mainly a Third World phenomenon – there are lots of things to say that are potentially of interest to students, that can carry a lot of theoretical work, and that are important issues. So we decided we would make a course on cities. The way in which we make courses at the OU is that we meet as a team. A course consists of in this case three books, which are collections of chapters, plus TV programmes plus radio. We meet every other Wednesday for half a day or a day and we bring what we've done in between and discuss it. It took us nearly a year before we had agreed how we were going to conceptualise a city in this course. What is a city? 'City' is a kind of chaotic concept in the weirdest sense of the word but we had to have agreement between us because we were going to work together. We couldn't have a random collection of people using a random collection of concepts; the students will want consistency. So not only have we got a way of thinking about cities now which I think actually works, but we've told the students this is the way we are thinking about cities, so it's helping them think conceptually. Even if they disagree, at least they know that this was a real process which faced us with a difficulty at the beginning of the course, which is, what is the subject of study? So often research is imagined as: you're supposed to know your question at the beginning and then you proceed to answer it. Yet it's so often the case that you don't even know the question until you've got to the end – and so much of the best research comes from the consequent necessity for continual hard, self-critical, thinking.

*Perhaps one could say, well for this part of my study a functional approach gives me a very good idea, the next part of the study let's say a conflict approach would be interesting...*

*Doreen Massey:* No. I think that is a bad way to proceed. You're thinking of putting together already-constituted bits. I start differently. I don't go into a supermarket of theories and decide which one I want to use. I don't look for something with a label to stick in there. I just keep worrying at it and what I use is the accumulated experience of, you know, n million years of doing research. These things are in your head, because you've read, because you've thought, because you've taught, because we've been in discussions like this. I think that maybe there are different ways in which we are using the term 'theory', because I'm talking much more about an overall theoretical approach, what holds these things together, but within that I don't think I'll use a bit of conflict theory here and I'll just shove in a bit of something-else-theory there.

*Maybe there are still some questions left that you can't explain, and suddenly...*

*Doreen Massey:* Well it happened yesterday. When we were having the discussion about alterity within sets of relations; how do you allow the space for real alterity within a way of thinking every identity through relations? Now that's a serious issue: it's one I know poses questions to the way in which I'm thinking but I want to have both things: I want to be able to think alterity and I want to think in terms of relations. So what do I do, I just keep on. I was thinking about it half the night, all the time coming back to how do you retain alterity, how do you allow autonomy? I think I've got somewhere in the sense that I think there's no possibility of unmediated interaction and therefore there is no possibility of total appropriation of one by the other, but all you can do with a thing like that is keep on thinking about it, keep on going at it, maybe keep on talking.

*I've read that you try to link postmodern thoughts to modernist historical materialism, and I'm not sure how you get these two things together.*

*Doreen Massey:* First of all, I'm very sceptical about a simple opposition between postmodernism and modernism and the kinds of ways in which antagonisms have been drawn up between them because I think people are to some extent defending impossible grounds on both sides. If I have an overall position on the two things as big blocks, before we get into more nuanced imaginations, it would be that postmodernism – actually it isn't postmodernism, the really serious questions that have been posed to modernism have been posed by postcolonial studies and by feminists, some of the most telling critiques asking the same kinds of questions have also come directly out of political struggles to some extent but also intellectual

struggles with a political cast in the more general sense – that poststructuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism in the wider sense, have asked some questions of what had become a kind of closed self-complacency of modernism – if you like a classic, maybe caricatured form of modernism – and that they were questions which had to be asked, which were right to be asked: questions about the foundations of rationality, questions about ‘objectivity’, the ability to become a bird and fly above the earth and detach oneself, questions about totality, questions about grand narrative.

I think it is not possible to evade answering these questions just by being rude about postmodernism because postmodernism seems like it’s just relativism. Whatever one thinks about the answers that are given by various strands of thought that get counted as postmodernism, I think the questions at least have to be taken extremely seriously. For me some of the biggest questions would concern things like grand narrative in the most general sense, notions of totality, the question of necessary situatedness, and therefore the inability to have something called an ‘objective view’, which precisely renders the criticism of postmodernism that it’s simply relativist beside the point, because the aim must be to abandon that dichotomy – there isn’t such a thing as that kind of objectivity, so you can’t simply counterpose it to relativism.

What was comforting about modernism was that you could say your political position was right because (you thought) you had a kind of scientific demonstration of it. What postmodernism does is unsettle that supposed ability to have recourse to proof of your political position. Now, to me that means you have to take more responsibility for your political position because you can’t just demonstrate it externally, you can’t ‘prove’ it in that sense within the scientific. So those are the kinds of questions that I’ve found interesting in some of these debates.

On the other hand that leaves an awful lot of what we characterise as various forms of modernism still extant. I mean there are aspects of ways of looking at the world for instance that I got out of Marxism that are still part of me, they are still massively influential. We were talking at one point about relational politics; well, one example of relational politics could be precisely the mutual construction of capital and labour, and politically what one is trying to do is not to abolish those already constituted identities but to get at the relational exploitation which constitutes both identities: which is exactly the kind of thing I was saying on Tuesday about the point of politics being to attack the relations, you know, to question the nature of the relations rather than to keep focusing upon the rights of particular identities. So the aim is not to get more rights for an already constituted working class but to abolish it, and to abolish it you have to abolish the bourgeoisie as well. Whole ways of thinking in terms of relations, whole notions around positionality, and a lot of stuff around structural analysis, I still retain as a strong influence from that period of theorising, and I don’t like the way in which within geography occasionally questions have been

posed as kind of ‘are you for class?’ or ‘is class the most important or is something else the most important?’, like that answer could be given as some eternal truth. I think it depends on the question at issue. So I wouldn’t want to abandon class analysis, I’d abandon it in the precise way, and the grander ways, in which it was formulated but I wouldn’t want to abandon many of the insights that I gained from having done that work 20 years ago. So yes, I mean you’re right that I would want to stitch together certain things I’ve learned from lots of periods rather than just abandon them completely and walk out as though it was a new world.

*Postmodernism has tried to question modernism, do you think the time has come to question some self-complacencies of postmodernism?*

*Doreen Massey:* There’s some of it I get really fed up with, yes. There’s a kind of pirouetting on a pin that goes on in some kinds of cultural analysis, where you take yet another text or yet another journey, and you discover, what a surprise, they are all sexist and racist. It seems to me that there is a kind of endless repetition now of a particular form of analysis of discourses which mobilises the same concepts over and over again, and it’s OK, but it’s not actually taking us any further. I also think that there has developed – I hesitate to say this, because I think it’s true of all kinds of academic writing – a way of writing which is peculiarly impenetrable, which doesn’t seem to be committed to communication at all and which drives me crazy. I think it sometimes can be more a demonstration of what people have read than a communication or an addition to our field of understanding. You have to be careful about that.

*You’ve mentioned a new Open University course on cities. How did you manage to conceptualise such a complex and disputed phenomenon as the city?*

*Doreen Massey:* We started off by saying, the way in which we want to approach the notion of a city is through a geography of social relations – we’re a geography course in a social science faculty and that’s the kind of intellectual ballpark and the slice through the real that we are concerned to engage with. So we are talking about the constructions of geographies understood as products of social relations. Cities are social relations, OK, dead obvious, everything is social relations, so what’s different about cities? And what we decided was that the crucial word for us over and over again was *intensity*, that cities were actually intensities, spatial intensities of social relations, compared with less intensive areas which are beyond the cities.

The next point was, it’s an intensity of social relations but it’s not closed. This intensity is precisely constructed through relations with the beyond, however one describes it, which is either the non-city world or other cities. So our working understanding is that cities are *open* intensities of social relations. Now what we

decided then *not* to do is to define at what point things became intense enough to be called a city – we have no line that we want to draw and to some extent we don't care, that's the kind of boundary of the category that we're not that interested in. So an open intensity of social relations was a way of trying to find a path through those things. It doesn't escape the problem of a gradation of intensities, but we in a sense just refused to be drawn into the business of drawing a line. However, there then come other things that give you an understanding of what the intensity is, that help you to make at least a qualitative differentiation.

One thing we were very concerned strongly to claim was that although we talk in terms of hierarchies, not all relations, not all systems or sets of interrelations are necessarily hierarchical. You can have egalitarian relations, you can have co-operative relations, you can have all kinds of sets of interrelations but they're not necessarily organised into a hierarchy and you certainly don't always have to have one place at the middle. And there are all kinds of different hierarchies or nets of relations, sets of interconnections. Cities are differentially placed within different kinds of sets of power relations. So capital cities are placed in particular sets of relations of political power: Frankfurt or London or Tokyo are placed in financial networks of power, Sydney and San Francisco are in particular kinds of cultural networks. Different cities will combine different positions within the multiplicities of those sets of hierarchies. That is partly what makes the cities multiple, that different people in different social groups within a city might be locked into those international or wider connections in different ways.

The way we thought about that internal differentiation was in terms of the city as a space-time, but that the groups and the social worlds within it are also differentiated space-times, so the space-time of the banker zapping in and around with an internationalised set of contacts to Silicon Valley and Tokyo, is different from the space-time of the beggar who has connections to the village and the countryside beyond and who goes home to a very different housing area. What the city is doing is articulating in some way those different social space-times, which allows us to talk about inequalities and so forth. That led us on to a final thing which is that cities in particular ways embody tensions. The city is the crucible of the new because of all the mixing, because of all the hybridity, because of the cultural contacts that happen in cities, cities are the place of the avant-garde. On the other hand that complexity can also lead to cities as the place of intolerance, of violence, of racial lack of mixing. So you always get this kind of positive/negative and we've got a few of those running through the course, like order/disorder, danger/excitement, utopia/dystopia, the city on the hill or the city as a Blade Runner kind of city. We are trying to get students to question those tensions all the time, ask 'order for whom?', 'violence for whom?', to play with those tensions, never to let it settle as cities as good or bad, and to understand those tensions as precisely produced out of the intensity of the city. The

very fact that they are intensities of social relations is partly what produces those ambivalent tensions which are what in the end people who live in cities, and planners, have to deal with.

*Perhaps we could take an outlook on the future of geography, its relation to other disciplines and its relation to the wider public – apparently these issues differ considerably from the British to the German context.*

*Doreen Massey:* I think in the UK – I don't know whether this is happening here so it may be that we have an advantage – geography is extremely well-placed within the social sciences at the moment, it's high profile intellectually. Within the frontiers of intellectual debate in some most general of senses, geography is well placed. One of the reasons for that is the wonderful work we've been doing! But I think there has also been, for a reason which isn't entirely clear but which is related to phenomena like globalisation, an opening up of the social sciences more generally to notions of spatiality. To some extent it's been no more than the use of a vocabulary; so people talk about location and place – the whole spatialisation of the vocabulary of social sciences. One of the responses of geographers has been to say come on, get real about this, get rigorous; you don't just bandy about these words – how are they actually operating?

There's also been a fairly serious beginning of the genuine spatialisation of the social sciences (except perhaps in the stricter, straighter forms of economics). So that's provided us with an entry in a sense to give ideas back, not just to go out and read some other philosopher and bring it into geography but actually to rework that philosophy, to say what difference spatialising it makes, what difference using it in a self-consciously geographical analysis makes to that set of theories. So there is an interchange now. I think there's still a tendency for us to import more than we export conceptually but our balance of trade is improving.

*But there had to be an opening up to social theory by geographers in the first place, to be able to communicate.*

*Doreen Massey:* Yes, we had to know the opportunity was there, we had to be reading those debates to find out that we could have an input into them as well. If geography indulges in some historical navel gazing or boundary patrolling, then it's dead. If there's been one thing that's come out of a relational view, it's that creativity comes from interacting, so to build a fortress and sit within it is the end.

But then there's also the notion of being a public intellectual, a discipline which engages with public areas of discussion. If there ever was a time during the latter part of this century when it should be possible for geography to engage it must be now, with the current massive spatial reorganisation of society both locally and



internationally, with the huge environmental questions where we're perhaps the only discipline that has historically had any pretensions to crossing, questioning the nature/culture boundary. There's so much that can be said by using the kind of skills that we have and the kind of perspectives that we should be able to bring to some of these issues which no other discipline would do in quite the same way, and that's not to be imperialistic about it, it's just a matter of the history of one's intellectual development. I like being in geography for lots and lots of reasons, but right now I think it's a great place to be, and there are many issues and reasons, some of which we have talked about, why we should be in there. And why we should make the most of it – both intellectually and politically.