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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPACE

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In the history of sociological thought, interest fo
spatial phenomena (the spatial aspect of social phenomena) ha
gone through three main phases.

In the first, from the origins of sociology to the 1930's
such interest has been high; sociology held close contacts witl
geography, which itself has been called "the first social scien-
ce", and the "geographical schools" were prominent, if no†
indeed dominant, in sociology . Much of the debate in early-
classical, positivistic sociology concerned its relations tc
natural sciences, i. e. the sciences of pysical, and therefore
also spatial, phenomena. Social geography and "anthropo-geogra-
phy" competed with sociology proper as the main science of man ir
its physical setting. The founding fathers of modern sociology,
and especially Durkheim and Simmel, although very interested ir
the spatial aspect of social phenomena, had to stress the autono-
my of the discipline from natural and geographical sciences. The
argument revolved on the problem of "environmental determinism",
i. e the degree to which human behavior and social structures are
"determined" or "conditioned" by the physical, and therefore alsc
spatial, environment. Having stressed the "sui generis" nature of
social reality, and therefore the indipendence of sociology from
natural-spatial sciences, these authors however proceeded to
develop, at the turn of the century, a distinctive sociological
approach to spatial phenomena.

Simmel's entire work is marked by a keen sensitivity to
these aspects; he employed a wealth of space-related theoretical
models, among which the psicho-social consequences of urban den-
sity and heterogeneity, the effects of marginality, the role of
the senses in structuring social behavior, etc. He also sketched
a short, intriguing, systematic model of "sociology of space".

Durkheim set the agenda (although he really did not
implemented it) for a distinctive branch of sociology to deal
with socio-spatial phenomena, and called it "social morphology".
Basically, social morhology was meant to appropriate to sociology
the entire subject matter of social geography: the distribution
of human settlements on the territory, the interaction of physi-
cal (both natural and man-made) environment on one side, and
social behavior and cultural patterns on the other, etc.

Simmel's and Durkheim's insights contributed, together with
other elelements (the doctrine of social darwinism, the natural
science of plant ecology) to the development, in the Chicago of
the 1920's, of a distinctive American socio-spatial science. i.

e. "human ecology", which was basically a sociology of modern metropolitan problems. The importance of space was programmatically stressed, but little developed in research practice.

In the second phase, 1940-1970, interest in space declined markedly. The reasons are manifold; among which of the rise to dominance of the functional-structural paradigm of Talcott Parsons, on one side, and of " dialectic-historical materialism" (marxism), on the other; both stressing sociology's links with history, philosophy, psychology and culture rather than biology and geography. The second-order reasons for such dominance are, in turn, numerous and complex; one of them being "technological optimism", the widespread feeling that modern (technological, industrial, rationalistic) society had become all-powerful, and that natural environment had ceased to be an external obstacle to the realization of whichever societal goal; that nature, environment, space, territory, were now appropriated by society, internal to it, socially manipulated and produced; objects, and no longer conditions of, and problems for , social processes.

In the third, contemporary phase, interest in spatial phenomena has revived markedly. Most leading theorists, such as Anthony Giddens and Randall Collins, are giving space a basic role in the "structuration" of social processes, and many wide-ranging theories, such as theories of national-political development and Emmanuel Wallerstein's "modern world-system" paradigm, are couched in basically spatial terms ("Center-periphery"). Again, the reasons are too plentiful and intertwined to be unravelled here. One of them is the overcoming of a narrow "nationalistic" view of society in favor of a planetary approach, in which the spatial patterning of social (societal) phenomena is self-evident. Another is, on the opposite side, the renewed interest in very small-scale social phenomena (personal interaction in everyday life, intimate life-styles, etc.) , in which space is again an important element, because such phenomena are closely linked to the organic space-structuring and space-overcoming endowement of the actor (body, senses, locomotion). A third reason is the ebbing of technological optimism, in face of the resistance and revolt of physical nature against the penetration and rape by man. The alarms over the sorry state of the planet, the dangers of population bombs, the depletion of basic natural resources, the accumulation of toxic waste, have reawakened even sociologists' consciuosness of the continuing dependence of man, and therefore society, on the physical (and hence also spatial) environment. The "human-ecological" tradition, never completely forgone, was thus revived in a completely new context. A fourth reason is the growth of sociological sub-disciplines dealing most closely with socio-spatial problems (urban sociology, rural sociology, regional sociology, sociology of planning, architectural sociology, etc.). The growing urbanisation of society, and the endeavors to rationally steer urban and regional development, has involved also sociologists in planning enterprises ("social production" and structuring of space) and the sociologist's interest in neighbouring socio-spatial disciplines.

2.Terminological intermission: space, place, territory, environment

In sociological literature there is a certain abundance and confusion of terms referring to the general concept of space, which is compounded if the usages of the other socio-spatial disciplines are considered. The usage of such terms as space, place, territory and environment varies not only among authors and schools, but also among the main languages used by sociolo- gists. Thus for instance, "space" seems favoured by French and German authors ("espace", and "Raum" respectively), while "terri- tory" is widely used by Italians. "Place" and "Lieu" seem fre- quent in Anglo-saxon and French literature, much less in the German and Italian ones. "Environment" and related terms (milieu, Umwelt, ambiente) have a long history and are widely used in many ways. It is not possible here to map analitically all these variations. Suffice it to warn that in this paper we shall stick to the following terminological stipulations:

1.By "space" we mean the abstract, formal, topological, metrical (geometrical) property of phenomena: their extension, their relations of distance and proximity, of smallness and bigness, of inclusion and exclusion, etc. Space is not a substan- ce, does not exist per se, apart from the objects it contains (relational, not absolute, concept of space).

2.By "place" we mean a relatively small, bounded portion of space (set of objects), possessing a certain systemic quality (identity).

3.By "territory" we mean a place which is the object of human activity and valuation (valued place). It can be the "territory" of the individual man (if the thesis holds that man , like many other species, has a "territorial imperative"); or the territory of a group. The concept of territory seems to have been generated in the context of political-military activities ("ter- ritorium" from "terrere" "to induce fear"), and has been developed in reference to political-administrative systems (territory as a necessary element of the State, regions, communities). Later on, it has been widely used, at least in some languages (es. Italian) also in economic and planning contexts ("territorial development, t. planning).

4. By "environment" we mean the totality of physical and biological elements (forces and things, energy and matter, processes and structures) that surround the unit of analysis (subject or object, ego or system) and have some relation to it. According to some theories, the global environment on the Earth's surface is itself a living system (environmental system, ecosys- tem, "Gaia" etc.). It comprises not only natural elements but also human artifacts and even human populations (as collections of organisms) . In social sciences, the concept can be stretched to contain also information-carrying signs and symbols (cultural environment). Being physical, the environment has, among others,

also metric, spatial qualities; but should never be confused with space. In this paper, we shall not deal with concrete, dynamic environment, but only with abstract, formal space.

3. Scales (levels) of social space.

People form social organizations of many kinds, and all of them have spatial aspects. They can be classified in several ways; according to the number of persons, their goals, their mode of operations, etc. One of the basic organizations is the family, which is quite clearly a spatial organization (household), because reproduction, love, sharing of food, and upbringing of offspring require intimacy, proximity, co-habitation, storage space, control of intrusions, etc. Another basic socio-spatial organization is the State, which is defined by the monopoly of violence (armed force) over a certain territory, and the capacity to fend off violence from outside its boundaries. Between the family and the State there is a complex fabric of organizations of all kinds: cultural, economic, political, administrative, etc. They also extend beyond the State, since States seldom are completely self-contained; in additions, States form between themselves their own complex networks of "international organizations".

In sociological parlance, social gropups or organizations seen in their spatial form (territorial basis) are called "communities".

For many purposes, it would be convenient to classify organizations according to their "level" or "scale" or place in the "spatial hierarchy". Sociological theory has mostly contented itself to deal with this issue in the dychotomous terms of small and large (village and city; small community, large society; everyday-life - large structures; life-world and system; micro-macro; primary and secondary relations; etc). Other socio-spatial disciplines have striven to articulate much more sophisticated typologies. Thus "Ekistics" distinguishes among ca. 12 levels of "human settlements", from the individual house (or room) to the metropolitan system and eventually to "ecumenopolis", the world-city.

Every large and complex system tends to organize itself hierarchically, and the human community, being a spatial system, shows some sort of spatial hierarchical organization. States, in particular, tend to organize themselves in a nested hierarchy of smaller administrative-political units: regions, provinces, counties, townships, etc. (the names are legion, according to local historical and linguistic traditions). Administrative subdivisions are not always congruent with social realities, but there is some relation between the two: real social communities tend to develop their own administrations, while administrative units, even when artificial at first, tend with time to create or develop communities.

The congruence of the spatial and the social order was easier in simpler societies, where space-overcoming technologies were primitive, physical proximity was essential for social interaction, and economy was based on local resources. Long-range commerce , writing, and finally the electronic media of communications have increasingly diverged the two orders; physical proximity in no longer required for interaction, and community. This has had profound effects on the spatial patterns of the social order, it has not completely destroyed them but made much more complex, and made such complexity the basic quality of modern society.

It seems analytically hopeless to work out a simple, clear, universal, rational typology of socio-spatial organizations according to their spatial scale or range or level; but its seems ethically important to do so, to counter the sense of hopeless chaos the common man feels in contemplating his world. Rootlessness, placelessness, loss of identity, loss of community are unpleasant and may have dangereous consequences. Retreat to the basic, primitive , still strong community-levels (family and nation) may also be inadequate. It seems important to develop a world view by which modern man may distribute its yearnings for identity and attachment to a fuller set of socio-spatial organizations (communities). The neighboorhood or village in which he raises his family, the metropolitan area in which he gets his livelihood and his goods and services, the wider region , marked by geographical and historical features which he feels more familiar, the State from which his whole life -his welfare and his death- depend; but also, beyond that, the community of nations which occupy a certain historical and geographical part of the world, marked by a certain linguistic and spiritual commonality; and finally the whole world, home of the single humankind and bounded by ecosystemic interdependence: "man belongs to all Ekistic levels, and owes his loyalty to each of them"(Doxiadis). The development of a persuasive scheme of the hierarchy of socio-spatial communities, overcoming the fixation on Family and Nation-State, and stressing the importance of intermediate, regional and international levels, seems an urgent duty for sociological theory.

4.Types of social space

The binary logic seems to prevail also in the sociological analysis of the types of space. On one side we usually find something variously called physical, geographical, geometrical, mathematical, "banal" space, or "space proper"; on the other side a vast collection of terms, such as , action-, operational-, behavioral- social-, pragmatic,-, cognitive-, per-ceptual-,conceptual-, virtual, personal-, psychological- relatio-nal-, lived-, experiential-, functional-, analytical-, symbolic-, cultural-, and many other kinds of space.

A historical-philosophical analysis of the concept of space readily shows the untenability of this dychotomy, which is

based on the equally dubious dychotomy between object and subject and a naive positivistic stance. What we call physical, objective, measurable space is really a construct of organic evolution and of our own organic (and psychic) endowment, of our ways to perceive, use and measure it. On the other hand, "human" spaces are no less "real" and "proper" than the "physical" one.

Instead of a dychotomy, what is needed is a typology of spaces that can bridge the barren gap between the physical and the social (the objective and the subjective) and bring some order in this chaotic field. Many authors, in sociology and related sciences (space economics, urban theory) have suggested something of the sort. Perhaps the best-known one is Christian Norberg Schultz's, which is based on the earlier one by Ernest Cassirer.

Building on them, and having reviewed a wide range of literature on "man and space" (geography, psychology, ethology, urban and architectural theory, economics, ecology, anthropology, sociology), the present author has attempted to classify space in 6 types, which are basically defined by corresponding types of human behavior (including mental behavior, i. e. approaches and modes of thought). Since each type of behavior tends to elicit e separate discipline to study it, the types of space also tend to correspond to different disciplinary focuses. They are arranged along a "biological-rational" axis:

a) **Ethological or biological spaces** proceed from the organic set-up of the human species. People structure space according to their six or seven senses, their locomotive apparatuses, their inborn mental structures and categories, and their inborn behavior patterns ("insticts"), the most famous of which is "territoriality". As the label implies, these spaces are mainly studied by disciplines broadly belonging to the biological field: ethology, physiological psychology, etc.

b) **personal spaces** are the product of people as persons, i.e. as members of a "historical" social group, defined by cultural models, norms, values, etc., and endowed with conscience and rationality. However, the focus here is still on the universal patterns of behavior of individuals and small groups, and hence studied mainly by (behavioral) psychology and social psychology.

c) **lived or existential spaces** are made up of subjective experiences (relations, memories, projections, emotions) people have with the outside world. The emphasis here is on subjectivism , internal states, and the totality of conscience; the method is phenomenological introspection; the aim is to derive generally valid principles not from the mechanical aggregation of observations of the outside world, but from the deep analysis of the individual experience. Existential and phenomenological philosopies have produced a voluminous literature on space, have strongly influenced modern geography, and have contruibuted heavily to the sociologist's new awareness of the spatial dimension.

d) **Symbolic or cultural spaces** share withy the preceeding ones the complexity of cognitive, emotional and evaluative contents, but in opposition to them, pertain not to individual conscience but to collective cultural systems (collective representations) and symbolic structures. Spaces are one of the languages (the silent language) by which symbolic meanings are communicated. Society is spatially structured, and socio-spatial structures are laden with meanings. Architecture reflects, projects and creates collective meanings, and the changing conceptions of space are expressed in architectural forms. Common language is replete with spatial metaphors, which have complex relations with mental spatial concepts and categories. Such linguistic and mental spaces tend tend to structure not only individual esperience of the world bu alsoto create corresponding "realities". Some examples of this will be given in the next section. Symbolic and cultural spaces are studied in particular by the various sciences of culture: the traditional ones , like history and philosophy, and the more modern ones, like semiology and anthropology. The theory of architecture and related fields have also given important contributions to this field.

e) **ecological spaces** are those that arise from those activities of man that pertain to "making a living", to "production and reproduction", to building settlements and working the land. Such activities are usually conditioned by material-energetic principles, by the law of minimum effort and efficiency, and characterised by means-end rationality. In the transformation of the physical environment to suit his own ends, man tends to give rise to regular spatial patterns. Ecological spaces are the unintented result, imprinted on the landscape, of the interaction between physical environement and human "adaptive", utilitarian, economic, "rational", "functional" behavior. Architectural, urban and regional settlement patterns belong to this category.

f) **Political and organizational spaces** are , like the preceeding ones, often clearly inscribed in the physical , man-made environment; like them, they tend to be rational-utilitarian; but unlike them, are the result of a conscious strategy of some social actor. Every complex organization must be articulated spatially, and space eneters in many ways in organizational processes. The management of space is one basic instrument of power, and every power holder, beginning from the State, strives to organize collective space (both physical and mental) to suit its own ends.

Like most typologies, this too is rife with ambiguities, confusions, redundancies, etc. Its categories are certainly not clear-cut. This is inevitable, given the nature of the field. This typology is merely an attempt to give some (provisional) order to a large body of literature drawn from many different disciplines. If we (in the tradition of Comte, Durkheim and Parsons) take sociology as the overarching discipline of human behavior, and "social" as the most important qualifier of Man, we

can call "social space" the result of the combination and interaction of all the above-mentioned types of space.

5. Spatial structures

As mentioned, human language and thought are filled with spatial images, concepts, categories, and forms. They may derive from several sources (ecological-evolutionary, experiential, cultural) and have several effects in moulding man's structuring of experience, his world-view, his behavior, and his artifacts. In turn, "external" spatial patterns, whether physical or behavioral, are reflected and re-worked in language and thought. The interaction between these two shperes (subject and outside world) is so close that it may be maintained that these structures bridge them. Spatial structures exist neither exclusively in the individual mind nor in objective outside reality, but in the constant interaction between them.

Among the first to be discovered and formalised is the geometrical triad of point, line and surface . In the theory of figurative arts and in urban theory we find analogous tripartitions (landmark, center, node; paths, boundaries, directions; domains, fields, etc.). In sociology some analysis can be found of the importance of such "qualities of space" as distance and proximity (intimate and close relationships are in many ways different from those between distant subjects) or level ("upper classes" are different from "lower" ones). Some difference between "North and South" can be found in most societies, while at the international level East and West also carry different associations. The couple "center and perypehry" has found a widespread use in the analysis of phenomena related with power and development.

We suggest that about a dozen of major, basic spatial structures (categories, forms, qualities, differences) can be identified:

1) the center; 2) the boundary; 3) distance (near and far); 4)verticality (up and down, high and low); 5) direction (locomotive axiality)(forward and backwards); 6) laterality (left and right) ; 7) geographical orientation (the four points of the compass); 8) the territory (surface, field, domain); 9) the path; 10) the bridge (link between formerly separeated systems); 11. the door (link between a formerly closed system and its environment).

In addition to these elementary, basic categories , a few more may result from their combination .

It would be interesting to explore systematically the meaning of these structures and their manifestations in human thought, language and artifacts. By way of illustration, suffice it to mention the long dominance of the left-right and of forward (progress)- backward (reaction, conservation) dimensions in

political discourse; or the importance of the dialectics between separating and linking structures (boundaries, doors, bridges) in architecture and design.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to devise a rational-empirical ranking of these structures. The order we have chosen above reflects merely our own preferences, although we are pretty sure that the most basic of all structures, at least in a sociological view, are the first four.

Probably related to such spatial categories are the so called "primeval figures" or "Urformen", which since times immemorial have fascinated human imagination and attracted a wide array of meanings and emotions: the circle, the spiral, the cross, the triangle, the labirinth, and so on.

6. Spatial images of society.

In the days of dominance of the structural-functional paradigm in sociology, it was insisted that society is a reality "sui generis", having little or nothing to do with space, and quite distinct from "spatial" human sciences, like geograpghy, ecology, etc. Even then however, sociological discourse could not help being imbued of spatial expressions, since all natural as well as scientific languages are interwoven- some more, some less- with such expressions. Many efforts have been made to distinguish between "mere" spatial metaphors and analogies, having only illustrative and didactic value, from "properly spatial" concepts, allegedly of little use in sociology. This distinction however is hardly tenable.

One of the most common spatial metaphors in sociology is that of social stratification and mobility: society is described as a pyramid being made up of social "strata", or classes, superimposed "one on top of the other", according to criteria of wealth, power, prestige, etc; and individuals can to a certain extent "move" upwards or downwards between them. But the sociological literature displays a wide array of such guiding images, some very general and widespread, others more rare and specific. In some, the concrete form seems prevalent; in others, the abstract spatial structure. It is not possible here to discuss adequately each of them; we must limit ourselves to a mere listing. The main spatial images or metaphors in sociological theory seem to be: a) the anthropomorphic impersonation; b) the organism; c) the theater ("drammaturgical" view); d) the chart: society as a bundle of social trends; e) the map: society as a population living on a territory f) the geometrical grid; g) the bloc-diagram: society as a system of elements (blocs) linked by flows (arrows); h) the network, composed of nodes and paths, or of "criss-crossing social circles"; i) the "concentric circles", useful especially to describe the process of "ecological expansion"; l) The Pyramid, already mentioned; m) the ladder (in which the different "levels of social reality", are depicted.

These sociological images of society can be conceived as a special sub-group of spatial structures. As such, they exist in the interaction between social reality and sociological thought; they are a reflection of some features of reality, but in turn contribute to shape it, as sociological ideas become ingrained in social doctrines, ideologies, and common discourse.

7) Socio-spatial theories and principles

Finally, sociological literature presents a number of theoretical propositions, principles and hypotheses on the rela- tions between space and human behavior. As hinted in the first paragraph, some modern theorists are (re-)integrating space at the very heart of sociological theory, and attempting to build a consistent, "pyramidal" theoretical structure around it. More modestly, we have attempted a simple list of more or less disjoint theoretical propositions. Here is a random sample: 1) All social phenomena, insofar as they are not purely mental, have a spatial dimension. The importance of such dimension varies according to the nature of the phenomenon and the goals of its analysis. 2) Man establishes relationships not only with other people and objects, but also with places. 3) Man is, to certain extent, a "territorial animal", projecting around himself a se- ries of "spatial bubbles". 4) Social order is based, among other things, on spatial order. Modern, complex societies could not function if people and things were not rooted to a predictable set of places. "Territory" and "urban infrastructure" are essen- tial and necessary elements of the social system. 5) Spatial proximity is an essential condition for sustaining intimate, face-to face-relations; which in turn are essential for the functioning of society and the well-being of the individuals. Communication technology will never wholly overcome the "friction of space", because love, affection, friendship etc. need at least periodic "propinquity". 6) Social relations express themselves into spatial relation, and viceversa ("we shape our buildings, and our buildings shape us"). Of course, the translation is not always immediate or faithful; it is filtered and distorted by many factors. 7) In simple sedentary societies, the corrispondence betwee the social and the spatial was clearer. In modern socie- ties, communication and transport technologies have brought about an extremely complex state of affairs; society is no longer easily "legible" from its urban, spatial forms. 8) In simple societies, spatial order was the unplanned result of spontaneous activity, uder the rule of semi-natural laws. In modern advanced societies, spatial order can only by realized through conscious, rational public regulation (planning). 9) Modern society does not only use available space: it also creates it, by building, dig- ging, opening up land through infrastructures, etc. ("development"). The production and commerce of space is a very important sector of modern economy, politics, etc. 10) Overcrowd- ing induces social and physical pathologies. 11) Spatial rela- tions can be given symbolic meanings. Space is a "silent lan- guage". 12) Perfect democracy can only be realized in small communities 13) Power in large socio-spatial systems requires a

the subdivision of space into a nested hierarchy of bounded cells, controllable at the gates. 14) Space is a highly valued commodity. Wealthy and powerful people tend to surround themselves by ample spaces. 16) Upper-class prople tend to live in more elevated homes (hills), and, since the invention of elevators, in upper storeys of apartment byuildings (penthouses) and to work in the top floors of office buildings. I7) There is a "human scale" that dictates the optimal spatial proportions of living spaces for organic satisfaction; but culture may easily modify it. 18) Freedom is basically a spatial phenomenon: freedom from intrusion in ones personal spaces (privacy), freedom to enjoy one's property, freedom to move among desired places, etc.

Some of these propositions seem rather self evident and even trivial; others would require long discussions and clarifications. Of corse, each is predicated on the "caeteris paribus" clause.

Undoubtedly, the list could be lenghtened at will; by multiplying the contexts of application, the specifications, etc. Much more difficult seems the development of a systematic, "pyramidal", logically consistent and empirically sound integrated theory of space and society. This will have to wait at least until a new, universally accepted sociological paradigm is developed; which seems very far off.

References

The limitations of space prevent us to list the ample literature on which this paper is based. For references, we must thus turn the reader to other, ampler writings of ours on the subject:

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14