

Geographies of responsibility

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GEOGRAPHIES OF RESPONSIBILITY

by
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ABSTRACT. Issues of space, place and politics run deep. There is a long history of the entanglement of the conceptualisation of space and place with the framing of political positions. The injunction to think space relationally is a very general one and, as this collection indicates, can lead in many directions. The particular avenue to be explored in this paper concerns the relationship between identity and responsibility, and the potential geographies of both.

Key words: space, place, identity, responsibility

Changing identities

Thinking space relationally, in the way we mean it here, has of course been bound up with a wider set of reconceptualisations. In particular it has been bound up with a significant refiguring of the nature of identity. There is a widespread argument these days that, in one way or another, identities are ‘relational’. That, for instance, we do not have our beings and then go out and interact, but that to a disputed but none-the-less significant extent our beings, our identities, are constituted in and through those engagements, those practices of interaction. Identities are forged in and through relations (which include non-relations, absences and hiatuses). In consequence they are not rooted or static, but mutable ongoing productions.

This is an argument which has had its precise parallel in the reconceptualisation of spatial identities. An understanding of the relational nature of space has been accompanied by arguments about the relational construction of the identity of place. If space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations, if we make space through interactions at all levels, from the (so-called) local to the (so-called) global, then those spatial identities such as places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing (Massey, 1994; Ash Amin in this issue).

These theoretical reformulations have gone alongside and been deeply entangled with political

commitments. What one might call the more general rethinking of identity engaged with a number of currents, from a determination to challenge the hegemonic notion of individuals as isolated atomistic entities which took on (or were assigned) their essential character prior to social interaction, through re-evaluations of the formation of political identities, to the fundamental challenges presented by second-wave feminism and by some in postcolonial studies. For these latter groups, rethinking identity has been a crucial theoretical complement to a politics which is suspicious of foundational essentialisms; a politics which, rather than claiming ‘rights’ for pre-given identities (‘women’, say, or gays, or some hyphenated ethnicity) based on assumptions of authenticity, argues that it is at least as important to challenge the identities themselves and thus – *a fortiori* – the relations through which those identities have been established. It is worth noting a number of points immediately. First, that although there are in the wider literature many disagreements about this, and many variations in emphasis, I take ‘identity’ here, along with the practices of its constitution, to be both material and discursive. Second, it might be noted that this reformulation of identity itself already implies a different spatiality, a different ‘geography’ of identities in general. Third, the political abandonment of the security of a grounded identity in what we might call the old sense has been difficult. The long and fraught debates over the political stakes at issue in the ability, or not, to mobilise the term ‘women’ are just one case in point. It has been a discussion which entailed not only theoretical confusions, and clashes between conceptual positions and the demands of ‘real’ politics, but – as if that were not enough – also huge emotional challenges and upheavals, not least about how one conceptualises oneself. Linda McDowell’s paper (this issue) explores an acute situation in this regard, and draws a clear connection between the conceptualisation of identity and the changing demands on policy and politics. Here, then, is another aspect of the connection between thinking relationally and the affective dimension of politics of which Nigel Thrift

writes in this issue. It is important to mention this here because the politics associated with the rethinking of spatial identities have been, and continue to be, equally emotionally fraught and liable to touch on deep feelings and desires not always immediately associated with 'the political'. Rethinking a politics of place, or nation, is an emotionally charged issue.

But that is what thinking place relationally was designed to do – to intervene in a charged political arena. The aim initially was to combat localist or nationalist claims to place based on eternal essential, and in consequence exclusive, characteristics of belonging: to retain, while reformulating, an appreciation of the specific and the distinctive while refusing the parochial.

This then has been a theoretical engagement pursued through political entanglement, and what I want to do in this paper is to push further this pondering over the spaces and times of identity and to enquire how they may be connected up with the question of political responsibility. The political location that has sparked these enquiries is London: global city and bustling with the resources through which the lineaments of globalisation are invented and coordinated. This, then, is a place quite unlike those regions considered by Ash Amin in his paper, and in consequence the challenges it poses, both conceptually and politically, though within the same framework are rather different.

The question

This destabilisation and reconfiguration of the notion of identity can lead in many directions, both conceptually and politically.

It can, on the one hand, turn us *inwards*, towards an appreciation of the internal multiplicities, the decentrings, perhaps the fragmentations, of identity. It is in this context that we consider place as meeting place and the inevitable hybridities of the constitution of anywhere. It is this which Ash addresses in his discussion of 'a politics of propinquity': the necessity of negotiating across and among difference the implacable spatial fact of shared turf. If places (localities, regions, nations) are necessarily the location of the intersection of disparate trajectories, then they are necessarily places of 'negotiation' in the widest sense of that term. This is an important shift which renders deeply problematical any easy summoning of 'community' either as pre-existing or as a simple aim (Amin, 2002). In London, with the cultural multiplicities of its 'postco-

lonial global status', that is an argument of peculiar force. Indeed, it may be argued that London/Londoners have begun to assume an identity, discursively, within the self-conception of the city, which is precisely around mixity rather than a coherence derived from common roots.

Now, it is perhaps in these terms, concerning the internal construction of the identity of place, that many of our threads of thinking about ethics have evolved. The old question of 'the stranger within the gates'. Many of our inherited formulations of ethical questions have that particular imaginative geography: the Walled City (and who shall come in), the question of engagement in proximity, the question of hospitality. Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism*, with its consideration of open cities (*villes franches*) and refuge cities (*villes refuges*), is a recent example. These questions are important and are by no means going away (Critchley and Kearney, in the Introduction to Derrida, call them 'perennial'). Thinking in terms of networks and flows, and living in an age of globalisation, refashions, but does not deny, a politics of place (see also Low, 1997). Propinquity needs to be negotiated.

However, there is also a second geography implied by the relational construction of identity. For 'a global sense of place' means that any nation, region, city, as well as being internally multiple, is also a product of relations which spread out way beyond it. In his paper Ash Amin has broached 'a politics of connectivity', and it is this issue which I wish to pursue. London, as a whole, is a rich city, certainly not a place on the wrong end of uneven development, with huge resources and a self-declared radical mayor who has proclaimed his desire to work towards London being a sustainable world city. There are certainly, in principle, more choices available to London than to the regions in the north of England. It is a city which exudes the fact that it is, indeed, a globally constructed place.

So, if that is the case, if we take seriously the relational construction of identity, then it poses, first, the question of the geography of those relations of construction: the geography of the relations through which the identity of London, for example, is established and reproduced. This in turn poses the question of what is the nature of 'London's' social and political relationship to those geographies. What is, in a relational imagination and in light of the relational construction of identity, the geography of our social and political responsibility? What, in other words, of the question of the stranger *without*?

On not opposing space and place

One of the difficulties of addressing this question stems from the way in which, in much academic literature and in many political discourses, local *place* is posited as being so much more meaningful than space. A regular litany of words accompanies the characteristic evocation of place; words such as 'real', 'grounded', 'everyday', 'lived'. They are mobilised to generate an atmosphere of earthiness, authenticity, meaning. And over and again that evocation is counterposed to 'space' which is, in consequence, understood as somehow abstract. So Edward Casey writes, 'To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the place one is in' (1996, p. 18). Or again, Arif Dirlik proposes that 'Place consciousness ... is integral to human existence' (1998, p. 8). Or finally – and I cite this one in particular because they erroneously attribute the sentiment to me – Carter, Donald and Squires in their collection called, precisely, *Space and Place* state that 'place is space to which meaning has been ascribed' (1993, p. xii). I want to argue that this line of argument is both intellectually untenable and politically problematical.

A first and obvious question concerns the universalising discourse in which so many of these claims are lodged. Place is *always* meaningful? for everyone everywhere? It is *always* a prime source for the production of personal and cultural identity? It is worth exploring this further.

One aspect of this universalisation of the meaningfulness of place concerns, ironically, the production of difference (and in this discourse the 'local' is frequently invoked as the source of differentiation). 'Place' is posited as one of the grounds through which identity is rooted and developed. The preceding quotations already hint at this, and Charles Tilley makes the point directly: 'Personal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a top-analysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place. Geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscapes or regions for human existence' (1994, p. 15). This feeding of place/placedness into identity may occur both at the level of individuals and at the level of 'cultures', as Tilley argues. The establishment of place, through renaming, through the claiming of territory and so forth, may also be a significant stake in the establishment of political identities. National liberation struggles have long wrestled with this. And Arturo Escobar's analysis of the Process of Black Communities' 'local strug-

gles' along the Pacific Coast of Colombia argued that they had as one of their axes of orientation a struggle for territory: 'The struggle for territory is thus a cultural struggle for autonomy and self-determination' (Escobar, 2001, p. 162). Examples abound.

Such struggles over place, and the meaningfulness in and of place, return us to the argument in the previous section that in any even minimal recognition of the relational construction of space and of identity, 'place' must be a site of negotiation, and that often this will be conflictual negotiation. This, then, is a first move away from the universalising/essentialising propositions implicit in some of the evocations of the meaningfulness of place. It may indeed, further, be a crucial political stake *to* challenge and change the hegemonic identity of place and the way in which the denizens of a particular locality imagine it and thereby avail themselves of the imaginative resources to reconstruct it. Indeed, the process of what they call 'resubjectivation' is an essential tool in J.K Gibson-Graham's attempt to work through an active politics of place in the context of globalisation. We shall return later to consider their important work in this regard. But the point for now is that this relationship between place and identity, in its many potential dimensions, is indeed significant if not in the manner proposed by writers such as Casey. One implication of this is that it matters very much how both 'place' and 'identity' are conceptualised.

A second set of questions which must be posed to the characteristic counterposition of space and place takes us back, again, to relational space. If we sign up to the relational constitution of the world – in other words to the mutual constitution of the local and the global – then this kind of counterposition between space and place is on shaky ground. The 'lived reality of our daily lives', invoked so often to buttress the meaningfulness of place, is in fact pretty much dispersed in its sources and its repercussions. The degree and nature of this dispersal will of course vary between individuals, between social groups and between places, but the general proposition makes it difficult seriously to posit 'space' as the abstract outside of 'place' as lived. Where would you draw the line around 'the grounded reality of your daily life'? As Ash Amin argues in this volume, the habitual now routinely draws in engagement at a distance. The burden of my argument here is *not* that place is not concrete, grounded, real, but rather that space – global space – *is so too*.

There are a number of ways into this proposition. The work of Bruno Latour provides one of them. At one point in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) he asks if a railway is local or global (p. 117). His reply is that it is neither. It is global in that in some sense it goes around the world; you may travel on it from Paris to Vladivostok (and the fact that this example misses out the whole of Africa and Australasia, as well as some other places, is only a particularly clear case of 'globalisation's' very selective incorporation of the global). However, and this is the crucial point here, the railway is also everywhere local in the form of railway workers, signals, track, points, stations. What Latour emphasizes wonderfully here is the groundedness, the emplacement, even of so-called 'global' phenomena. The same point has frequently been made by geographers such as Kevin Cox (see his 1997 collection *Spaces of Globalisation: Reasserting the Power of the Local*), and about those iconic sectors of globalisation finance and 'high technology'. Could global finance exist without its very definite groundedness in that place the City of London, for example? Could it be global without being local?

This, however, is to deal with only one part of the evocative vocabulary of place. It is to talk of groundedness. What I want to argue here is that this in itself begins to highlight a terminological slippage in some of the discourses about the meaningfulness of place. To speak of groundedness is to do just that and that alone. One important dimension of the phenomenological position is that the meaningful relation to place is intimately bound up with the embodied nature of perception. In other words, it is based in the fact of groundedness, of embodiment. One direction in which to take this argument is that *every* groundedness, through that very fact of emplacement, is meaningful. A Heideggerian line of thought might follow this thread. To do so, however, means to abandon 'space' altogether; for there is only place (*Ort*). Certainly there cannot be a dichotomy between meaningful place and a space which is abstract.

As we have seen, however, this is a dichotomy which is not only retained but which figures widely in the debate about place, and particularly in the context of globalisation. Here it must be that only certain forms of emplacedness and embodiedness, certain specifiable relations of situatedness, can entail meaningfulness and the creation of identity. Thus Arturo Escobar, who earlier in his major article on this issue cited the phenomenological approach to the meaningfulness of place, writes that

'capital operates at the local level [i.e. it is 'grounded'] but cannot have a sense of place – certainly not in the phenomenological sense' (2001, p. 165). This is an important point – embodiedness, then, has to be on certain terms to result in meaningfulness. (Some of the more universalist phenomenological claims seem to me to begin to unravel at this point.) And Arif Dirlik writes of the 'essential placelessness of capitalism' (cited in Gibson-Graham, 2002, p. 34) – here, again, 'place' must be distinguishable from simple locatedness.

Yet there are still, it seems to me, uneasinesses in this argument which it may be important to address. Escobar, again, writes that 'From an anthropological perspective, it is important to highlight the emplacement of all cultural practices, which stems from the fact that culture is carried into places by bodies ...' (p. 2001, 43). But then, capitalism is a cultural practice, or at least it has its cultural sides, and indeed these vary between places. The vital confrontation between Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism and the continental European attempt to hold on to a more social democratic form is one obvious case in point. Capitalism too is 'carried into places by bodies'. Indeed, politically it is important that this is recognised, in order to avoid that imagination of the economy (or the market) as a machine, a figuring which renders it unavailable to political debate.

My aim here is not really to take issue with authors with whom I agree on many counts but to indicate some worries about the kinds of argument that are being mobilised about the nature of place and the local and to suggest that there are questions which remain unaddressed about the relations between place, embodiment and meaning.

This, however, is important to the argument here less in terms of challenging the basis of the meaningfulness of place than in beginning to explore its potentially wider ramifications. If space is really to be thought relationally, and also if Latour's proposition is to be taken seriously, then 'global space' is no more than the sum of relations, connections, embodiments and practices. These things are utterly everyday and grounded at the same time as they may, when linked together, go around the world. Space is not the outside of place; it is not abstract, it is not somehow 'up there' or disembodied. Yet that still leaves a question in its turn: How can that kind of groundedness be made meaningful across distance?

This is an issue because, certainly in Western societies, there is a hegemonic geography of care and

responsibility which takes the form of a nested set of Russian dolls. First there is 'home', then perhaps place or locality, then nation, and so on. There is a kind of accepted understanding that we care first for, and have our first responsibilities towards, those nearest in. There are two qualities of this geography which stand out: it is utterly territorial, and it proceeds outwards from the small and near at hand.

There are many reasons for that Russian doll geography. There is, undoubtedly and with recognition back to the preceding arguments, the still-remaining impact, in this world sometimes said to be increasingly virtual, of material, physical proximity. There is the persistent focus on parent-child relationships as the iconic reference point for questions of care and responsibility (see Robinson, 1999 for a very insightful critique of this, and of its effects). (This is a focus already geographically 'disturbed' by the numerous family relations now as a result of migration stretched over truly global distances.) There are all the rhetorics of territory, of nation and of family, through which we are daily urged to construct our maps of loyalty and of affect. There is the fact that, in this world so often described as a space of flows, so much of our formal democratic politics is organised territorially – and that spatial tension is at the heart of the questions being asked in this paper. It has also been suggested that this focus on the local, and the exclusive meaningfulness of the local, has been reinforced by post-colonialism and poststructuralism through a wariness of meta-narratives.

There are, then, many reasons for that territorial, locally centred, Russian doll geography of care and responsibility. None the less, it seems to me, it is crucially reinforced by the persistence of the refrain that posits local place as the seat of genuine meaning and global space as in consequence without meaning, as the abstract outside. Murray Low has counterposed the relational understanding of space and place which underlies this present volume to another powerful and influential discourse through which, he argues, there 'has been a reassertion of closeness or face-to-face interaction in various forms as a source of morality in social life' (Low, 1997, pp. 260–261). He cites Bauman (1989, 1993) in this regard, and counterposes Bauman's position to the reconceptualisation of place as advocated here¹ 'not to deny the difficulties involved in reorienting ethical conduct and political value away from immediate relationships and contexts, but to insist that the draining of distanced and

multiply mediated political and social relationships of the possibility of embodying democracy or social justice is a key feature of the politics of place' (p. 265). I would want to open up the possibility of an alternative politics of place which does not have these characteristics, but the central burden of Low's argument is correct and important. Indeed opening up a politics of place which does not deprive of meaning those lines of connections, relations and practices, that construct place, but that also go beyond it, is a central aim of this paper. If that is impossible, as some of the counterpositions of space and place would seem to imply, then how do we maintain a wider politics? How then is it possible to respond to the challenge in John Berger's oft-quoted comment that 'it is now space rather than time that hides consequences from us'?

Identity and responsibility

There are, in fact, many resources to draw on here. One of the most striking, and one which links up many aspects of the debate within geography, is the work of feminist philosophers Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. In their book *Collective Imaginings* (1999) they have attempted to reformulate the notion of responsibility by thinking it through the philosophy of Spinoza. Their 'Spinozistic responsibility', as they call it, has a number of characteristics which cohere with the arguments being developed here. First, this is a responsibility which is relational: it depends on a notion of the entity (individual, political group, place) being constructed in relation to others. Second, this is a responsibility which is embodied in the way place is said to be embodied. And third, this is a responsibility which implies extension: it is not restricted to the immediate or the very local.

What concerns Gatens and Lloyd, however, is extension in *time* and, in particular, present responsibility for historical events. Their specific interest is in the potential white Australian collective responsibility towards aboriginal society for historical events. They write:

In understanding how our past continues in our present we understand also the demands of responsibility for the past we carry with us, the past in which our identities are formed. We are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are.

(Gatens and Lloyd, 1999, p. 81)

Responsibility, in other words, derives from those relations through which identity is constructed. My question is: Can the temporal dimension of responsibility drawn out by Gatens and Lloyd be paralleled in the spatial and in the present? For just as 'the past continues in our present' (a very Bergsonian reflection) so also is the distant implicated in our 'here'. The notion of responsibility for the past has led to a spate of 'apologies' for it. Apologising does not always amount to the same thing as taking responsibility. But were the 'distance' to be spatial, and in the here and now rather than imagined as only temporal, the element of responsibility – the requirement to do something about it – would assert itself with far greater force. The identities in question, including those of place, are forged through embodied relations which are extended geographically as well as historically.

I believe this can be usefully linked up, also, to Gibson-Graham's writing in this area. Her argument is that one necessary component in the project of re-imagining 'the power differential embedded in the binaries of global and local, space and place' (p. 29) is a reformulating of local identities. For her a central aspect of this 'resubjectivation' is an imaginative leap in which we can learn 'to think not about how the world is subjected to globalization (and the global capitalist economy) but how *we are subjected* to the discourse of globalization and the identities (and narratives) it dictates to us' (pp. 35–36; emphasis in original). As with the work of Gatens and Lloyd, I want to twist this in a slightly different direction. For while we are indeed all discursively subject to a disempowering discourse of the inevitability and omnipotence of globalisation, materially the local identities created through globalisation vary substantially. Not all local places are simply 'subject to' globalisation. The nature of the resubjectivation required, and of the responsibility implied, in consequence also varies between places. This thread of argument will be taken up again centrally in the next section.

The persistence of a geographical imaginary which is essentially territorial and which focuses on the near rather than the far is, however, also evidenced even in the work of Gatens and Lloyd. For when they do touch upon the spatial, in this question of the construction of identities, they write that 'the experience of cultural difference is now internal to a culture' and they cite James Tully: 'Cultural diversity is not a phenomenon of exotic and incommensurable others in distant lands. ... No. It is here and now in every society' (Tully, 1995, p. 11). But

why oppose these things? The internal hybridity of place is incontestable. But cultural difference is implacably also very different others in very distant lands. In our current concern for hybridity at home we must not forget that wider geography.

Fiona Robinson has tackled some of these issues head-on. In her book *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory and International Relations* (1999) she challenges the assumption that the base model for relations of care is the family. By releasing responsibility and care from that imaginatively localising and territorialising constraint, but at the same time holding on to the groundedness it is said to represent, she argues for the possibility of a more extended relational groundedness, and thus provides yet another component for the project to rethink relations at a distance; the question of the stranger without.

On not exonerating the local

There is one other thread which is crucial to the argument (i.e. to addressing the question of the geographies of our political responsibilities). Once again it turns upon the troubled nature of the pairing of local/global.

There is an overwhelming tendency both in academic and political literature and other forms of discourse and in political practice to imagine the local as a product of the global. Understanding place as the product of wider relations has often been read as understanding place as having no agency. All the agency somehow lies beyond (the incoherence of this position, given the critique of the space/place dichotomy advanced in the second section of this paper, is evident). As Escobar characterises the classic mantra: 'the global is associated with space, capital, history and agency while the local, conversely, is linked to place, labor, and tradition – as well as with women, minorities, the poor and, one might add, local cultures' (2001, pp. 155–156). Place, in other words, 'local place', is figured as inevitably the *victim* of globalisation.

However, in recent years there has been something of a fightback on this front. The work of Gibson-Graham has been important in articulating an argument that 'the local', too, has agency. She also argues, crucially, that it is important both theoretically and politically to distinguish between various contrasting formulations of this agency. As she points out, even those positions most concerned to assert the overwhelming power of the global (where 'the global is a force, the local is its field of

play; the global is penetrating, the local penetrated and transformed', p. 27), the local is not entirely passive. In these worldviews the agency of the local consists in moulding global forces (which arrive from outside) to specific circumstances. Local place, here, is the locus of the production of heterogeneity. This is its role in life. It is an endless theme of cultural studies. Moreover, on some readings, even this agency is promptly snatched back again since it may be argued that this kind of differentiation is just what capitalism wants: whatever the local does will be recuperated; the 'global' will reign supreme. This is not only a diminished understanding of the potential of local agency; it is also, I would argue, a very diminished understanding of spatialisation, in terms simply of inter-local heterogeneity.

Gibson-Graham, Escobar, Harcourt and many others want to go beyond this very limited view of local agency. For Gibson-Graham one of the critical issues here concerns the re-imagining of 'capital' and 'the global' away from being seamless self-constituting singular identities, and the assertion of the presence in their own right of other forms of practice, other ways of organising the economic. It is a form of re-imagination, of an alternative understanding, which she argues is an essential element in the redistribution of the potential for agency: an attempt to get out from under the position of thinking one's identity as simply 'subject to' globalisation; it is a process which goes hand in hand with inhabiting that reforming identity through engagement in embodied political practice. The stress on the embodiedness of all this, again, is interesting. Of her opponents, the globalists, Gibson-Graham writes of the rejection of local politics as seeming 'to emanate from a bodily state, not simply a reasoned intellectual position' (p. 27). This is an arresting observation, which resonates with all those arguments about Western science's desire for removal from the world (the messiness of the local); it may be, as I shall argue below, that there is also something else at issue.

These arguments in favour of both recognising and acting upon the potential for local agency are extremely important and I should like to take them off in some rather different directions. Once again this returns us to the nature of agency.

In much of this literature the agency, or potential agency, imputed to the local could be characterised either in terms of resistance and fightback (i.e. fending off in some way the 'global' forces) or in terms of building alternatives (itself characterised

as taking advantage of those areas of economy and society which are not simply 'subject to' globalisation). None of the authors whom I have cited are arguing for a politics which simply posits the local (good) against the global (bad).² Nor is this a localism based on any kind of romantic essentialism of place. It is, none-the-less, a politics which is characterised over and over again as a 'defence' of place.

However, if we take seriously the relational construction of space and place, if we take seriously the locally grounded nature even of the global, and take seriously indeed that oft-repeated mantra that the local and the global are mutually constituted, then there is another way of approaching this issue. For in this imagination 'places' are criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries which constitute both themselves and 'the global'. In this view local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts *against* the global. For places are also the moments through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced. They are 'agents' in globalisation. There are two immediate implications. First this fact of the inevitably local production of the global means that there is potentially some purchase through 'local' politics on wider global mechanisms. Not merely defending the local against the global, but seeking to alter the very mechanisms of the global itself. A local politics with a wider reach; a local politics *on* the global – and we do need to address global politics too. This, then, is a further, different, basis for the recognition of the potential agency of the local.

The second implication of this line of reasoning returns us again to the central question of this paper. If the identities of places are indeed the product of relations which spread way beyond them (if we think space/place in terms of flows and (dis)connectivities rather than in terms only of territories), then what should be the political relationship to those wider geographies of construction?

Now, this is a general proposition. However, different places are of course constructed as varying kinds of nodes within globalisation; they each have distinct positions within the wider power-geometries of the global. In consequence, both the possibilities for intervention in (the degree of purchase upon), and the nature of the potential political relationship to (including the degree and nature of responsibility for), these wider constitutive relations, will also vary. As Escobar points out and exemplifies so well, one of the significant implications of

thinking globalisation in terms of genuinely relational space is the multiplication, and diversification, of speaking positions. For him, this suggests above all a consideration of local cultures: 'one has to move to the terrain of culture' (2001, p. 165). Gibson-Graham would add to this the very different articulations in different places of capitalist and other forms of economy. While these things do clearly differentiate places, what needs to be added to them as a further source of differentiation is the highly contrasting position of places in different parts of the world in terms of the patterns and power relations of their wider connectivity (a point well argued by Eugene McCann, McCann, 2002). Put bluntly, there is far more purchase in some places than in others on the levers of globalisation.

It is no accident, I think, that much of the literature concerning the defence of place has come from, or been about, either the Third World or, for instance, deindustrialising places in the First World. From such a perspective, capitalist globalisation does indeed seem to arrive as a threatening external force. Indeed, in his appreciative commentary on Dirlik's argument that there has been in recent years in academic writing 'an erasure of place', Escobar argues that this erasure has been an element in Eurocentrism. The argument is a very important one:

The inquiry into place is of equal importance for renewing the critique of eurocentrism in the conceptualization of world regions, area studies, and cultural diversity. The marginalization of place in European social theory of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been particularly deleterious to those social formulations for which place-based modes of consciousness and practices have continued to be important. ... The reassertion of place thus appears as an important arena for rethinking and reworking eurocentric forms of analysis.

(Escobar, 2001, p. 141)

There are a number of points here, to take the argument further. First, and somewhat parenthetically, the very term 'eurocentrism' here carries its own ironies. For the argument seems to refer mainly to the USA, as does Escobar's detection of a possible return to place – through analysis of sessions at the AAG. In contrast, in Spanish geography there is relatively little concern for space, in the sense meant in this discussion, but rather an overwhelming focus on *territories* (Garcia-Ramon, personal

communication). In Germany the concern with regions continues strongly. In the UK there was the major programme of localities studies. As has been pointed out there are notable differences between geography in the USA and that in anglophone Europe, with non-anglophone Europe having its own variations again (see Massey and Thrift, 2003). It is not possible to generalise from the USA to the whole of the First World.

Second, it is important to register that Escobar is careful not to fall into an essentialising or simply bounded understanding of place. (None-the-less it is worth considering whether the kind of formulation used by José Bové – the defence of *variation* – might be preferable.) And although the burden of his article is about the defence of place, he does later broaden his formulation: 'it is necessary to think about the conditions that might make the defense of place – or, more precisely, of *particular constructions of place* and the *reorganization of place* this might entail – a realizable project' (Escobar, 2001, p. 166, emphasis in the original). This expansion is crucial.

Third, it may well be that a particular construction of place is *not* defensible – not because of the impracticality of such a strategy but because the construction of that place, the webs of power relations through which it is constructed, and the way its resources are mobilised, are precisely what must be challenged. I am thinking here of a particular place. As pointed out at the beginning of this meditation on the geographies of responsibility, the immediate provocation has come from trying to think what a politics of place might look like for London.

'London' as a node within the power-geometries of globalisation could hardly be more different from those Pacific rainforest places in Colombia of which Escobar writes, nor from some of the places of disinvestment in which Gibson-Graham has worked. Of course, it is internally differentiated, violently unequal and occasionally contested. But without doubt London is also a 'place' in which certain important elements of capitalist globalisation are organised, coordinated, produced. This place, along with a few others, is one of their most important seats.

The work of Saskia Sassen (1991, and subsequently) has been of particular importance in establishing the nature and significance of those places we call 'global cities'. From her book *The Global City* onwards she has stressed the strategic role of these places as command points within the global economy, as key locations for finance and pro-

ducer services, as sites of production and innovation, and as markets. Such places, then, do not fit easily into the generalised understanding of the local as the product of the global. It is from these local areas that much of what we call the global stems. In the Introduction to their edited collection *Global City-Regions* (2001), Allen Scott and colleagues allude to the same point a number of times – the enormous resources concentrated into these cities which are mobilised to produce and coordinate ‘globalisation’: they ‘function as essential spatial nodes of the global economy and as distinctive political actors on the world stage’ (p. 11). Global cities, then, are not only ‘outcomes’ of globalisation. Moreover, it is the very fact of globalisation, the increasing degree of spatial dispersion, which has been reinforcing of their centrality (Sassen, 1991; Scott, *et al.* 2001). There is a virtuous circle in which these cities are key.

It is also key to Sassen’s particular argument that the various lines of coordination and control cannot just be assumed (from the size of the cities, say, or from the location there of banks and corporations and international regulatory institutions); they must be produced and continually maintained. Thus: ‘A key dynamic running through these various activities and organizing my analysis of the place of global cities in the world economy is their capability for producing global control’ (p. 6); there is ‘a new basic industry in the production of management and control operations, of the highly specialised services needed to run the world economy, of new financial instruments’ (p. 14). (One might add political and ideological rhetorics, cultural constructions and symbolisms.) She writes of ‘the *practice* of global control’ (p. 325; emphasis in original). This emphasis on production is significant in two ways. First, as Sassen herself demonstrates, it grounds the process of globalisation, and it grounds it in place: ‘a focus on production does not have as its unit of analysis the powerful actors, be they multinational corporations or government, but the site of production – in this case, major cities’ (p. 325). What these cities bring together is more than just the peak organisations of globalisation; it is also a huge complexity of affiliated and subsidiary institutions. Place, one might say, very clearly matters.

If we now bring to these arguments of Sassen and others about the nature of global cities such as London the reflections on the relationship between identity and responsibility posited by Gatens and Lloyd, a new line of argument emerges about the

potential nature of ‘local’, or place-based, politics. In understanding the formation of that part of its identity which is as a financially elite global city (and this is the aspect of its identity most stressed by the city’s planners and policy-makers, not to mention ‘the City’ itself), ‘we understand also the demands of responsibility’ for those relations with other parts of the world through which this identity is formed.

Moreover, the second significance of Sassen’s emphasis on the *production* (rather than just the assumption) of global control in various forms is that it also points to its lack of inevitability. It can be intervened in. There is a possibility of politics. This is an argument made by John Allen (2003) in his work on power. And in specifying further the possibilities for intervention, the various potential political avenues open to taking responsibility for this identity as a global city, it would also be necessary, as Allen argues, to disaggregate and characterise much more clearly the ways in which the accumulated resources of London are in fact mobilised into distinct modes of power.

This, then, would be a local politics that took seriously the relational construction of space and place. It would understand that relational construction as highly differentiated from place to place through the vastly unequal disposition of resources. This is particularly true with regard to the specific phenomenon of capitalist globalisation. The mobilisation of resources into power relations between places is also highly differentiated, and a local politics of place must take account of that.

Gibson-Graham writes of her antagonists the globalists that ‘their interest in globalisation is to understand it, expose it, and, hopefully, transform it, but they are not attracted to the local as a site of realistic challenge and possibility’ (p. 28). Her own strategy is to argue for a specifically local politics and indeed to criticize others, such as Dirlik, when it seems that the local may be valued less in itself than as a potential base for wider actions. I am trying to argue something different again: that one implication of the very inequality inherent within capitalist globalisation is that the local relation to the global will also vary, and in consequence so will the coordinates of any potential local politics of challenging that globalisation. Moreover, ‘challenging globalisation’ might precisely in consequence mean challenging, rather than defending, certain local places.

Indeed, it seems to me that to argue for the ‘defence’ of place in an undifferentiated manner is in

fact to maintain that association of the local with the good and the vulnerable to which both Escobar and Gibson-Graham quite rightly object. It contributes to a persistent romanticisation of the local. Gibson-Graham writes of the difficulties of overcoming an imagination in which the global is inevitably imbued with more 'power' and agency than the local. In most discourses of globalisation this criticism is absolutely spot-on. It is even more so if the local place is London, Tokyo or New York.

What I am concerned with here is a persistent *ex-oration of the local*. It takes the form not only of a blaming of all local discontents on external global forces, and a concomitant understanding of 'local place' in entirely positive terms, but also of understanding globalisation itself as always produced somewhere else.

Bruce Robbins, in his book *Feeling Global* (1999, p. 154), muses ironically upon some USA-based political struggles around globalisation:

One distinctive feature is that capitalism is attacked only or primarily when it can be identified with the global. Capitalism is treated as if it came from somewhere else, as if Americans derived no benefit from it – as if ... American society and American nationalism were among its pitiable victims By refusing to acknowledge that these warm insides are heated and provisioned by that cold outside, these avowedly anticapitalist critics allow the consequences of capitalism to disappear from the national sense of responsibility.

Perhaps this difficulty of looking at ourselves, at our own, and our own locality's, complicity and compliance, is another element in Gibson-Graham's characterisation of the rejection of local politics as visceral. Certainly one could make about London, and some of London's professedly progressive politics, the same argument that Robbins makes about some of the 'anticapitalism' of the USA.

Theoretically, conceptually, this political stance accords with a notion of capitalist globalisation as somehow 'up there'. The evocation of a placeless capitalism can lead all too easily to an erasing from the imagination of the places in which capitalism (and thus globalisation) is very definitely embedded;³ those places – such as the City of London – in which capitalism has accumulated the resources essential to the mobilisation of its power. This indeed is an erasure of place which is politically disabling.

Indeed, there is a similar puzzle in Dirlik's wider argument that the survival of place-based cultures will be ensured only when the globalisation of the local compensates for the localisation of the global. He means this, I think, in both social and conceptual terms (see Escobar, 2001, p. 163; Gibson-Graham, 2002, p. 34). But as Gibson-Graham points out in relation to development, this 'is a curious comment, given that "development" is now widely recognized as a "local" project of particular Western economies and regions that very successfully became globalized' (2002, p. 55). An exactly parallel point may be made about the long history of capitalism and its current forms in globalisation, or about formulations such as 'global culture overpowers local cultures' (Escobar, 2001, p. 144, in a commentary on Castells and Dirlik). For writers in the USA and Western Europe in particular this is to be blind to the local roots of the global, to understand – in classic fashion – the dominant local as being global/universal.

This imagination of capitalism/globalisation being somehow 'up there' has interesting parallels also with that notion of power, or the resources of power, as being everywhere. As John Allen points out, this is an imagination which makes political challenge particularly difficult (2003, p. 196). It is important that we analyse and recognise both the specific forms of power at issue in any particular case and the specific locations of its enabling resources.

In the ongoing struggle to disrupt the binaries of local and global, Gibson-Graham writes of the 'practices of resubjectivation, a set of embodied interventions that attempt to confront and reshape the ways in which we live and enact the power of the global' (p. 30). This re-imagination of local positioning is, she argues, absolutely crucial because 'it addresses the deep affective substrate of our subjection to globalization' (p. 30). Such a re-imagination is indeed vital to any sense of empowerment, but, in certain locations within the unequal power-geometries of capitalist globalisation, 'resubjectivation' must include also a recognition of the *responsibilities* which attach to those relations and aspects of our identity – including those of our places – through which we, and our places, have been constructed.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the dimension we call 'space' is that it is the dimension of multiplicity, of the more-than-one (Massey, 1999). One vital element that this insight gives us is the insistence, even within globalisation, on a plurality of

positionalities. Included within that, and crucial to the dynamics of the production of inequality, is the recognition that not all places are 'victims' and that not all of them, in their present form, are worth defending.

Indeed, it is precisely taking responsibility for challenging them that should be a political priority.

Relational politics beyond a global city

'London' as a global city is certainly by no means a victim of globalisation. It also, at the time of writing (2003), has a mayor committed to shifting the nature and perception of this place. Ken Livingstone's declared aim, in numerous statements, is to turn London into a different kind of global city. This then is a space-time conjunction (a progressive force at the political head of a powerful node within the relations of globalisation) which could be seized for inventing a rather different politics of place.

There are, of course, many radical groups working in London but I am concentrating here on the politics of the local state specifically. This is because this is a local state with serious potential to rearticulate the meaning of this place, to recharge its self-conception, its understood identity, with a different kind of politics. Ken's statements give evidence of this intention, and the previous period of London government under his leadership gives evidence that the potential is realisable. The GLC (Greater London Council) of the early 1980s was one of the key foci of opposition to the government of Margaret Thatcher. It was, in other words, a key opponent of the national government which did more than any other to mould the national economy, the major institutions of the international economy, and the national consciousness, into forms which favoured neoliberalism. In return for its opposition, Margaret Thatcher abolished the GLC. When Ken was re-elected, with Thatcher long gone but with Tony Blair's government having picked up the baton of neoliberalism, his opening words on accepting the result were: 'As I was saying when I was so rudely interrupted fourteen years ago...'. There is a real question, then, already hanging in the air, of how the politics of opposition to neoliberalism will be continued.

It must also be recognised that in this term of office much has indeed been done – from a doughty if unsuccessful battle against the government's tortuous privatisation of London's Underground, to the organisation of a congestion charge on vehicles

in the city centre, to a whole range of measures against racism and celebratory of the capital's hybridity. This last measure continues a longer characteristic of the capital and of a range of social movements within it. The place is most certainly riven with racism (the murder of Stephen Lawrence being an iconic moment) but one strong aspect of its self-identity is none-the-less constructed around a positive valuing of its internal mixity. To me, this renders even more stark the persistent apparent oblivion of London and Londoners to the external relations, the daily global raiding parties of various sorts, the activity of finance houses and multinational corporations, on which the very existence of the place, including its mixity, depends.

The London Plan gives evidence that this oblivion is largely characteristic also of London's new governing council. The Plan, and its range of supporting documents, understands London's identity primarily as being a global city. Moreover, this in turn is presented primarily as a function of London's position within global financial markets and related sectors. This is presented as fact, and also as an achievement. The Plan presents no critical analysis of the power relations which have had to be sustained for this position to be built and maintained. It does not follow these relations out across the world. Only in one (important) respect is this question of the nature of this relational construction of this aspect of London's identity held up to scrutiny and investigated further – the question of the demands on natural resources, and the capital's environmental footprint. Quite to the contrary the Plan has as its central economic aim the building up of London as a specifically financial global city. In its consideration of this role, and of this strategy, the Plan fails to recognise both London's huge resources and their historical and current mobilisation into power relations with other places, and the subordination of other places and the global inequalities on which this metropolis depends and upon which so much of its wealth and status have been built. It does not question, for instance, the human resources on which it draws to enable its reproduction – which range from nurses from Africa, badly needed on that continent, and graduates from the rest of the UK (thus draining those regions of one element in their potential regeneration). Such relations are riven with political ambiguities and raise difficult issues which any 'exemplary' global city should want to address openly and directly. Furthermore, when the London Plan does explicitly address 'relations with elsewhere', the analysis

is pervaded by anxiety about *competition* with other places, in particular Frankfurt as an alternative financial centre. This form of self-positioning represents a significant imaginative failure which closes down the possibility of inventing an alternative politics in relation to globalisation.⁴

Had that closure not been imposed, all kinds of alternative politics and policies towards neoliberal globalisation might have been proposed. They could have raised to consciousness, opened up to debate, even disturbed a little, London's current position as promoter and seat of coordination of that formation.⁵

For instance, and posing the least political challenge to the hegemonic order, there could have been a far broader and more imaginative sectoral definition of London's claim to global city status. The existing narrowness of the current definition is probably the strategic aspect of the Plan which has been most subject to criticism, and from a whole range of political directions (Spatial Development Strategy, 2002). A wider sectoral definition, following some of London's other global connections (other than finance, that is), would also have had very different implications, both socially and spatially, *within* the metropolis itself, broadening the growth potential and the economic benefits away from the Square Mile and its ever-spreading area of influence and from the relative elite of the financial sectors. There is little doubt that the current narrow focus is an element in the continuous reproduction of poverty and inequality within the urban area.

Such a broadening of the meaning of 'global city' would, moreover, be but one element in a necessary re-imagining of the whole of the metropolitan economy. London is far more mixed than the Plan allows; indeed in their mammoth study *Working Capital*, (2002), Buck, *et al.* having demonstrated this point empirically, go on to argue that complexity and diversity are precisely crucial strengths of London's economy, strengths which could be placed in jeopardy by an over-concentration on finance.⁶

It might also be possible, however, to mount a more explicit questioning of, and challenge to, the current terms of neoliberal globalisation. Alternative globalisations could be supported. The GLC of the 1980s, for instance, gave aid in a variety of forms to the building of trade union internationalism. Or there could be a programme of support for fair trade associations both for their day-to-day operation and for the debates which they aim to stimulate. Other suggestions have been made of build-

ing in various ways, both economically and culturally, on the global links embedded in London's ethnic complexity. Twenty years ago huge controversy was aroused by Ken Livingstone's statements about Irish politics. 'The capital city should not have a foreign policy', shouted most of the newspapers. Yet London has a huge population of Irish descent. Irish politics are alive in the streets of the city, in certain areas in particular. To pretend that the boundaries which enclose the right to vote also enclose political influence and interests is indeed to 'pretend'. External interests are already present, through multinational capital, through social and cultural networks, through political organisations which do not stop at the boundaries of the city (Low, 1997). To make such issues at least open to debate would be to contribute further to local government's being genuinely political rather than (apparently) merely a matter of administration (see Ash Amin's paper, this issue). London ranks as the second city in the world (after Brussels) for the presence of international non-governmental organizations (Glasius, *et al.* 2003); surely the issues with which they engage could legitimately be a part of political debate in the city. Or again, perhaps a fuller recognition of the co-constitution of relations of power could be embodied in collaborative, rather than competitive, relations with other places. (Phil Hubbard, 2001, has written about this possibility more generally.) In particular, there might be collaboration, around issues of globalisation, with other Left-led cities.

It would be disingenuous to claim that a bundle of strategies such as these would on their own do much to alter the dynamics of the current form of globalisation. They would certainly make some difference in their own right. But one of their more important effects would be to stimulate a public debate on London's place within current globalisation, to provoke awareness of the capital's conditions of existence. And conditions of existence are what Gatens and Lloyd are referring to when they rethink the concept of responsibility through a recognition of the relationality of identity. To adapt their phraseology to refer to geography rather than history: We are responsible to areas beyond the bounds of place not because of what we have done, but because of what we are. A re-imagining of London's identity in these terms, a re-recognition, would be very similar to what Gibson-Graham calls for as a first step of 'resubjectivation', but in this case it would be 'empowering' in a wholly different sense. Sassen has argued, indeed, that global

cities are rich sites for the development of 'transnational identities' (Sassen, 1991, p. 218). Such cities 'help people experience themselves as part of global non-state networks as they live their daily lives'; and 'cities and the networks that bind them function as an anchor and an enabler of cross-border struggles' (p. 217). Sassen's concern in this work was to examine struggles *within* global cities, but her arguments hold out potential also for a political recognition of the international interdependence of those cities. Places, though, are not themselves in any simple sense 'agents', and this is one of the troubling threads that runs through some of the literature referred to in the previous section. All of my arguments work against place as some kind of hearth of an unproblematic collectivity. Indeed, 'counter-globalisers' within London, and the kinds of strategies advocated here, precisely open antagonisms which cut through this place. 'Londoners' are located in radically contrasting and unequal positions in relation to today's globalisation. The political argument should be about how those small and highly differentiated bits of all of us which position us as 'Londoners' give rise to responsibility towards the wider relations on which we depend. And that 'London' voice is a powerful one. In the past it has been a subversive voice, and it could be so again.

My argument in this paper, though, has not been only about London. It is a general one. Certainly place can be a political project, as Gibson-Graham put it, but a real recognition of the relationality of space points to a politics of connectivity and a politics whose relation to globalisation will vary dramatically from place to place. Challenge to the current construction and role of a place may sometimes be a more appropriate strategy than defence. And it may be necessary to try to develop a politics which looks beyond the gates to the strangers without.

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Notes

1. He is citing Massey, 1994.
2. Although Gibson-Graham is arguing for a local *as opposed*

to an extensive politics (see the critique of Dirlik, mentioned above). This is not the position being argued in this paper.

3. Just to clarify this, Dirlik's use of 'place' here is a quite confined one but, as I have argued above, this can lead to its own difficulties. Moreover, places such as 'the City', the very hearths of an international capitalism and places cultivated to exude that status and to maintain a monopoly position over it, are indeed also 'places' in that very narrow sense (see here the work of Michael Pryke; Linda McDowell; Nigel Thrift).
4. There are also questions to be raised about London's relations to the rest of the UK. These are not discussed in this paper, but see Amin, *et al.*, 2003.
5. Only a few indications will be given here.
6. It is also more than a question of diversity since London's economy is also a site of clashing trajectories between different elements of capital. The *London Industrial Strategy* of the 1980s GLC presented a view of the London economy which was radically different from that in the current Plan.

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