

Jack Trego

Dr. Poole

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The Dialectic of Space, History, and Social Relations: An Applied Case Study of Algiers

Introduction

Humans conceive, create, and inhabit spaces in all types of settings, rural and urban. Through this process, a dialectic emerges between the created space, the historical milieu that space was created in, and the social relations which formed and occur in that space. Multiple philosophical questions arise from this relationship: What is the nature of the dialectic between space, history, and social relations? Precisely how does space reflect history and social relations? And finally, how does space then further influence social relations after its creation? This study is important for it can provide lessons on the implications of modernization: if spaces are destroyed, what is lost – in terms of historic or culturally-significant meanings – and how does their destruction influence what activities occur in that space? To respond to this query, this paper will examine space in its relation to history and social relations, and then apply these findings to a case study of Algiers, Algeria. An analysis of the dialectic between space, history, and social relations reveals space as the product of these two factors, as well as itself a productive factor towards new social relations.

Background

The concept of space is credited more as a modern phenomenon, but throughout history it has been discussed and utilized in various ways. Originally, the primitive view of space saw it as

inherently connected to matter: “space, substance, and matter were one.”¹ From this foundation, three threads of evolution successively emerged and took over the previous: firstly, people began to conceive of space in more abstract terms, which allowed the concept of space to detach itself from physical place; secondly, the study of the spatial dialectic developed, which is the interaction between space and its occupiers, specifically at how each influences the other; thirdly, space was examined in terms of its material basis.² It is after this third thread that Marxist thought began to analyze space in terms of its connection to social relations between classes.

In modern times space is examined through the angle of social relations. Emile Durkheim is credited with coining the term “social space,” which is the “humanly constituted abstract field of societal events.”³ It is important to note that this newly conceived “social space” is not necessarily connected to real, physical space, i.e. place. The concept of social space is fully separate from physical place. In addition, social space is a product of the creation of a second nature out of first nature, a concept Lefebvre introduced in *The Urban Revolution*: “From this moment on [the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries], the City appeared as a second nature of stone and metal, built on an initial, fundamental nature made of earth, air, water, and fire.”⁴ Lefebvre’s work encompassed much more than the concept of space, but his discussion of the urban centers around space: the transformation of space was a concomitant aspect of the urban revolution. Since this second nature was built by humans, the production of space could be shaped and manipulated more than first nature, or reality. For example, in a

¹ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 96.

² Smith, *Uneven Development*, 99, 101.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 25.

medieval city tenement building there may be four floors. In terms of first nature, this may equate to the size of a tree that resides outside of the city walls. However, in terms of second nature, each floor of the tenement building may be “measured in terms of social rank and class, whereas the height of the tree cannot.”⁵ In other words, the difference between the first and second floor may indicate a different social status, but the same physical distance on a tree signifies nothing of the sort: it is all the same tree. The new meanings and social relations formed by the creation of a second nature are inherent in the act of production.

The Dialectic between Space and Social Relations

Space reveals the social relations inherent in its production, as well as reacting back and influencing the social relations which occur in it. Typically, these relations are interpreted by Marxists as the relations of production, meaning those between workers and capitalists, and between the workers and their labor. Lefebvre views space in this way: “space as a whole has become the place where reproduction of the relations of production is located.”⁶ However, one can also see an arrangement of social relations, apart from this Marxist critique, emerge in space. For Edward Soja, an urban theorist, “all organized space will be seen as rooted in a social origin and filled with social meaning.”⁷ He believes that “space itself may be primordially given, but the organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience.”⁸ In this sense, Soja views the production of space as constituted by the relations between individuals and as distinct from a Marxist critique.

⁵ Smith, *Uneven Development*, 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷ Edward W. Soja, “The Socio-Spatial Dialectic,” *Annals of the association of American Geographers* 70, 2 (1980): 210.

⁸ Soja, “The Socio-Spatial Dialectic,” 210.

On the other hand, Manuel Castells, a Spanish sociologist, views the production of space from the state level. He posits that “urban structure is explained by an ensemble of processes that shape, distribute, and relate ‘ecological units,’” with ecological units being individuals or populations.⁹ For him, then, these relations are mainly those that are dictated by the central authority who creates the urban structure. He lists six “principle ecological processes”: concentration, centralization, decentralization, circulation, segregation, invasion-succession.¹⁰ All these processes shape each other and, for some, lead into each other. For example, the processes of centralization and decentralization “underlie the processes of mobility of the urban structure and, consequently, the functions of *circulation*.”¹¹ Each of these ecological processes also affects the population: concentration increases the density of a population, usually via public housing; segregation involves making “the social content of space...homogenous [and] strongly differentiated in relation to external units”; and invasion-succession occurs when a new population enters an already occupied space.¹² Castells further links these determined social relations with history in stating that they “express...the determinisms of each type and of each period of social organization.”¹³ These state-level regulations and urban development policies influence the social relations of spaces by shifting, dividing, moving, and supplanting populations. In addition, these new spaces reveal the social relations by showing the relationships between different minority and majority groups, and between each of those groups and the government. In reaction to these policies, though, the newly-dictated social relations

⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Edward Arnold, 1977) 119.

¹⁰ Castells, *The Urban Question*, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 115.

recreate themselves and that space, redefining it differently than the intention of the government's policy.

The Black Belt in Chicago provides an example of these processes at work. This region was the result of segregational policies by the city of Chicago in response to mass migration of African Americans into the city in the first half of the twentieth century. Due to the large immigration – hundreds of thousands – they formed their own urban population. However, the white population of Chicago did not want to mix with the incoming black population, so they created “restrictive covenants” which legally forbid white homeowners from renting or selling their properties to black people.¹⁴ As a result, the black population was shunted into what is known as the Black Belt: a continuous strip of housing projects, roads, and communities which contained the vast majority of the black population. It soon became a slum due to lack of civil services, overcrowding, and from white landowners sectioning apartments into smaller “kitchenettes” and charging high rates.¹⁵ However, this dense concentration of the black population of Chicago resulted in a blossoming of culture. The work of numerous writers, poets, musicians, and artists rendered the city “one of, if not the center, of urban African-American art, blues and jazz, dance, theater, poetry and fiction, and sociological study.”¹⁶ This example demonstrates the intimate relation between space and social relations: from the space of the Black Belt – despite its horrid conditions and general decrepitude – emerged the Chicago Black Renaissance Movement. The African-American population living in the Black Belt at the time redefined the space: they inverted the negative living conditions of the area into positive artistic creation.

¹⁴ “Housing and Race in Chicago,” Chicago Public Library, last modified May 1, 2018, <https://www.chipublib.org/housing/>.

¹⁵ “Housing and Race in Chicago.”

¹⁶ City of Chicago, Department of Zoning and Land Use Development, *Chicago Black Renaissance Movement*.

Doreen Massey, a British social scientist and geographer, discusses further the relationship between space and social relations. She provides three propositions about space:

First, that we recognize space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. [...] *Second*, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories exist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. *Third*, that we recognize space as always under construction.¹⁷

Regarding her first proposition, she elevates the concept of space from physical place into the abstract domain. For her, space is “constituted through interactions”: in any space, a dialectic emerges between that space, and the interrelations and interactions between the population that occupies or uses that space. Accordingly, since there is such a rich interaction, space is also the domain of possibility, where all possible “distinct trajectories exist.”¹⁸ In other words, spatial structure, organization, and form ~~shape~~ the structure, organization, and form of the social relations in that space. It is a self-propagating system, similar to Lefebvre’s third space, which he called representational space. He defined it as an amalgam of “symbolized space and everyday lived space.”¹⁹ It combined the elements of his first two spaces: material space, or spatial practice, as “reflected in the patterns of daily life and provid[ing] a structure for everyday life,” and representative, or conceived space, “the space of planners, engineers, and cartographers”

¹⁷ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 9.

¹⁸ Massey, *For Space*, 9.

¹⁹ Isa Baud et al., “Developing Participatory ‘Spatial’ Knowledge Models in Metropolitan Governance Networks for Sustainable Development,” *Change2Sustain* 1 (2011): 4.

which “often presents an absolute space that represents and produces a conceived reality.”²⁰ This third space both shows material space and conceived space, but also stands on its own in that the associative fusion of material and representative space differs from its component parts: this third space is thus “material spaces infused with particular spatial imaginations.”²¹

The Dialectic between Space and History

The concept of space contains both physical place and abstract space. The latter concerns the idea of space, what it signifies or the meaning it produces by virtue of its existence. Physical place is the concrete form of the space, its edges and contours, the material it’s made from, its size, and more. These two dimensions of space creates a dialectic: ideas about abstract space shape how physical place is created, and the structure of that finished product – that place – then further shapes how people act in that space beyond the designers’ original intentions. This fusion between what Lefebvre called the conceived and the perceived space is necessarily tied to history, for a certain array of ideologies – and their concomitant design decisions – define each historical period.²²

“Planners, engineers, and cartographers” create space that “represents and produces a conceived reality.”²³ Their decisions in conceiving space and constructing it are dictated by their ideology, which is temporally situated. Thus, when material space is constructed it represents that ideology for it can do anything but forgo its ideology and history. In the words Castells, “[Space] is not, therefore, a mere occasion for the deployment of the social structure, but a

²⁰ Baud et al., “Developing Participatory ‘Spatial’ Knowledge Models,” 4.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

²³ Baud et al., “Developing Participatory ‘Spatial’ Knowledge,” 5.

concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which a society is specified.”²⁴ Lefebvre is in agreement: “Each period, each mode of production, each particular society has engendered (produced) its own centrality: religious, political, commercial, cultural, industrial, and so on.”²⁵

The French philosopher’s stance differs slightly from Castells’ in that he extends the concept to a material conclusion. Lefebvre sees history in space mainly in the structure of cities and, specifically, in the placement of the center in that city. His assertion can be shown in the three, among many, possible models of urban city structure: the concentric zone model, the sector model, and the multiple nuclei model.²⁶ Each model has its component parts – including residential sectors, business districts, industrial manufacturing, suburbs – laid out in various ways. For example, the concentric zone model is constructed of rings of different areas; the sector model has its various sectors in different shapes; and the multiple nuclei model has multiple centers. Each model originated in different time periods and came to represent or signify those time periods. For instance, the sector model was conceived in the late 1930s by Homer Hoyt, an economist, to allow the city to grow outwards.²⁷ Occurring after the Great Depression, Hoyt’s plan aimed to improve the economy and create capital through city growth and development.

Case Study: Algiers, Algeria

Algiers, Algeria demonstrates these theories, concepts, and models of space as representative of history and as an influencing factor on social relations. This city has a long

²⁴ Castells, *The Urban Question*, 115.

²⁵ Lukasz Stanek, “Urban Society and its Architecture,” in *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011): 192.

²⁶ Donald J. Ziegler, Maureen Hays-Mitchell, and Stanley D. Brunn, “World Urban Development,” in *Cities of the World: World Regional Urban Development* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012): 35.

²⁷ Ziegler, Hays-Mitchell, and Brunn, “World Urban Development,” 36.

history of colonization, oppression, and segregation, beginning with its colonization by France in 1830.²⁸ In modern times, the linked issues of overcrowding, insalubrious living conditions, and the deterioration of the historic *Casbah* can all be traced to the colonial period and to the way physical space was formed and what sort of social relations occurred, and were allowed to occur, in those spaces.

For the first fifty years of its colonization of Algiers, France's urban development and planning was dictated by their military: they built "wide roads and large squares for the rapid circulation of troops," in the process destroying numerous traditional houses, shops, and avenues.²⁹ Consequently, the indigenous population felt violated and fled into the rural countryside, and the empty space they left was soon occupied by Europeans, supplanting the original population and accelerating the rate of urbanization due to the wealth they brought. Beginning in the 1880s, owing to the burgeoning viticulture industry, the economy in Algiers flourished, in turn drawing back those supplanted rural, nomadic peoples. However, since their homes were overtaken by Europeans, they were nearly all forced into the historic *Casbahs*.

In 1931 Le Corbusier released his *Plan Obus* which accelerated population growth but, fatally, did not help re-integrate the "new Muslim proletariat," those rural, nomadic people who returned to the city.³⁰ As a result, these people "lived apart from the European residents – separate as well as unequal" – in the *Casbahs*.³¹ The issue of overcrowding, and the inability of colonial France to resolve it via public housing, led to the emergence of *bidonvilles*, or shanty-towns, improvisatory settlements made from whatever materials the people could find and use.

²⁸ Karim Hadjri and M. Osmani, "The spatial development and urban transformation of colonial and postcolonial Algiers," in *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, (London: Routledge, 2004): 2.

²⁹ Hadjri and Osmani, "The spatial development of Algiers," 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The issue of overcrowding compounded with the issue of insalubrious living conditions in the combination of a high concentration of people and a lack of adequate resources or leadership by the French. The deterioration of the *Casbah*, a historical and culturally significant space, stemmed from these two elements, too. Indeed, since the French government was focused on the overcrowding issue, they “somehow abandoned the Casbah.”³²

Algiers is an example of the dialectic between space and history. The origins of the current overcrowding problems are found in the colonial period, during which colonial France’s urban development policies in the city supplanted and alienated the indigenous population and allowed a new European population to take their places. Although colonialism as a practice has ended, the fundamental tenets of colonialism – the segregation of peoples, the subjugation of indigenous populations to European immigrants, the implementation of a social hierarchy – are visible in the current population distribution of Algiers and its issues of overcrowding. This city also shows history in its spatial layout: in connection to the overcrowding issue, the creation of bidonvilles “imped[ed] the spatial development of the city towards the south and south-east.”³³ The overcrowding issue and the spatial restrictions placed on Algiers, limiting its growth, thus demonstrate that “[space] is not, therefore, a mere occasion for the deployment of the social structure, but a concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which a society is specified.”³⁴

In terms of social relations, the case of the deteriorating Casbah is revelatory. The Casbah is the classic North African town with a maze-like structure and organization. The Casbah of Algiers especially holds cultural and historic significance: in 1992 UNESCO declared it a World Heritage site for its representation of a “profoundly Mediterranean Muslim culture, synthesis of

³² Hadjri and Osmani, “The spatial development of Algiers,” 24.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ Castells, *The Urban Question*, 115.

numerous traditions.”³⁵ Despite this cultural significance, the colonial French government nevertheless pursued their military planning and vast urban development, ignoring the Casbah and letting it deteriorate. Its cultural meaning, imbued with a “deep-rooted sense of community,” was effaced in favor of modernizing the space to fit colonial France’s policies.³⁶ In addition, the Casbah was historically a trading post. This meaning was lost too, as shown by the exodus of original building owners who left “for better and more prosperous areas.”³⁷ The Casbah also demonstrates the various dimensions of social relations and specifically the links between state-ordained relations and relations between individuals. For Soja, “all organized space will be seen as rooted in a social origin and filled with social meaning.”³⁸ However, this “social meaning” is easily influenced and dictated by the government’s policies and how they “shape, distribute, and relate ‘ecological units’.”³⁹ Massey’s first proposition summarizes this interaction in stating that space is “constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.”⁴⁰ The globality of colonialism interact with the “intimately tiny” – the “ecological units” – to produce new social relations within these new spaces. The Casbah shows this multi-dimensional interchange. The top-down government policy, with its supplanting and alienation of the indigenous population, led to the breakdown of individual social relations, as shown by an “increase in social problems and delinquency” in the Casbah.⁴¹ Although the individual people can create their own “social meaning,” the government can likewise easily dictate their interactions and fundamentally change the social relations.

³⁵ Kasbah of Algiers, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/565>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Soja, “The Socio-Spatial Dialectic,” 210.

³⁹ Castells, *The Urban Question*, 119.

⁴⁰ Massey, *For Space*, 9.

⁴¹ Hadjri and Osmani, “The spatial development of Algiers,” 25.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study of the dialectic between space, social relations, and history has revealed the various dimensions and effects of their relationship. Space exposes the social relations of its production and is also the location of the organic creation of new social relations which react against the original usage intentions of that space. In its relation to history, space reflects it via its physical structure and the direct connection to ideologies and social systems which are situated in certain time periods. The city of Algiers shows this dialectic in its modern issues of overcrowding, insalubrious living conditions, and the deterioration of the *Casbah*, the origins of which are situated in the colonial period and show the social relations of that period as well as after.

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