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SPATIAL OCCUPATION— DESTRUCTION— VIRTUALIZATION

Types, categories, and processes of a
crucial factor in social life

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It is not from space that I must seek my dignity,
but from the government of my thought. . . .
By space the universe encompasses
and swallows me up like an atom;
by thought I comprehend the world.

—Blaise Pascal ([1670] 1958, Chapter VI:
The Philosophers. Fragment 348)

Norbert Elias as methodological stimulator for the analysis of spatial transformations

Norbert Elias would have been pleased to contribute to the approach of analyzing the “refiguration of spaces” (Löw and Knoblauch in this book) because he was particularly proud of having “discovered” the significance of figurations for sociological analysis. Elias was deeply convinced that a focus on relational figurations was an integral yet missing key to recognizing and understanding causal relations and coherences within societies. This is why he developed a methodological approach to historical sociology that carried the spirit of the *longue durée*-orientated *Annales* School. Based upon his understanding of relationality and processuality within social relations, Elias ([1939] 1969, [1939] 1982) intended nothing less than to recalibrate and re-establish sociological research.

Elias insinuated that historical and sociological sciences alike are habitually concerned with states—in the sense of static conditions, not of course in the political sense—instead of processes, without even differentiating according to the objects of their inquiry. In contrast to his idea, today’s research mainly focuses on probabilities and contours of a possible “next society” (Baecker 2007). Even those require relating past events to the present in order to predict the future.

Following Elias's insights, in this chapter I address the beginning of spatial history and its interwoven myths of origin, corresponding mentalities, and strategies of entitlement (Rehberg 2014, 73–75, 257–286) to exemplify the interdependence between geo-physical spaces and culturally created ones. Both dimensions always act simultaneously as natural conditions of life and as objects of reorganization in conjunction with the interpretation of their associated magical, religious, commercial, ruler, or whatever. What matters most to me is the indispensable interplay of these different aspects over time, such that spatial effects always appear simultaneously both as perceived and interpreted realities, and as spatial designs and fantasies shaped by their materiality. The relevance of correspondence between physical effects of space and cultural influences on space becomes obvious when one analyzes spatial transformations in the *longue durée*. The fruitfulness of such a processual perspective is evident in the historical–sociological approaches of Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and many other authors, such as Edward P. Thompson, Michael Mann, Immanuel Wallerstein, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Stefan Breuer, or Fraya Frehse (in this book).

In his *History of Rome*, Theodor Mommsen's condensation of the connection between the natural and cultural power of spaces—for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature—becomes almost visual. Mommsen (1862) depicts the spatial relations formed and influenced by the Mediterranean in a quite revealing way:

The Mediterranean Sea with its various branches, . . . alternately narrowed by islands or projections of the land and expanding to considerable breadth, at once separates and connects the three divisions of the Old World. The shores of this inland sea were in ancient times peopled by various nations belonging in an ethnographical and philological point of view to different races, but constituting in their historical aspect one whole. This historic whole has been usually, but not very appropriately, entitled the history of the ancient world. It is in reality the history of civilization among the Mediterranean nations; and, as it passes before us in its successive stages, it presents four great phases of development—the history of the Coptic or Egyptian stock dwelling on the southern shore, the history of the Aramaean or Syrian nation which occupied the east coast and extended into the interior of Asia as far as the Euphrates and Tigris, and the histories of the twin-peoples, the Hellenes and Italians, who received as their heritage the countries on the European shore.

From an early “Eastern” point of view (*ex oriente lux*), the Mediterranean was conceived of as “upper ocean of the dawn” and became a point of reference in a coordinate system consisting of “Europē” and “Asia,” extended by a third part of the world, namely “Lybia” or “Africa” as described by Herodotus (Berger 1907). The hubris of Xerxes was dramatically staged in Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BC), while Herodotus (1920, 7.8C) bears witness to the Persian king's intention to expand his land by making “the borders of Persian territory and of the firmament of heaven be the same.”

Even then a differentiation was achieved that simultaneously expressed a unity—not one of different countries but rather their connection and separation by the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean was already considered “*mare grande*” or “*mare nostrum*” in antiquity. That name was later used by Mussolini’s fascist regime for the legitimization of its colonial engagements and was recently brought back into our awareness through the headlines about the criminally organized passages by refugees. This image of natural influences on spatial structures that are conversely modified by human interventions connects spaces of power with their original natural territory.

Interplay of the appropriation of physical space and the construction for large-scale territories in the *longue durée*

Migration in early human history

It may well be said that human history begins with *homo erectus* around 1.5 to 1.8 million years ago. As suggested by the Out-of-Africa theory, humans first migrated from East Africa to today’s “Asia” about 50,000 to 70,000 years ago, before reaching “Europe” and “North America” later on. To understand the further development of these huge spaces, paleontologists rely on evidence of material culture, that is to say archaeological remains by means of which forms of settlement, production methods, and ways of life can be reconstructed (Parzinger 2016). The same is true for any other cultural traces like “works of art” (especially cave paintings), which began to emerge around 30,000 BC (Rehberg 2009). All of these indicators suggest that humans appropriate and configure space. More precisely, perhaps, they reveal a fundamental “openness to the world” (“*Weltoffenheit*”) (Scheler [1928] 2009), which enables human beings to actively adapt their cultures to a wide variety of spatial and climatic conditions. Therefore, mankind is the only species—as Arnold Gehlen ([1940] 1988, 30) put it—that is not bound to a specific “climatic, ecological, etc. milieu,” but is “viable all over the world, under the pole and the equator, on the water and the land, in the forest, swamp, mountains and steppes.” In all these environments, humans can survive when succeeding in establishing their “second nature” by adapting to spaces as well as transforming them through cultural changes. This is profoundly constitutive for the basic concept of “culture” developed from settlement-based agricultural societies. The Latin word for “farming”—“*colere*”—does not simply mean the sowing and harvesting of crops but also implies the development of rites corresponding to the highly essential cultivation of soil. Therefore, possibilities and probabilities of survival have always been laid out in terms of spaces, which themselves were always reformed and redesigned in long-lasting and continuously ongoing processes.

Early empires

In order to outline the importance of migration and manorial land grabbing for spatial transformations, it is helpful to regard the earliest human migrations, which were driven by the search for habitats. The appropriation of spaces had been closely

connected to large-scale, often nomadic migration, at least since 4000 BC. Since the settlement processes during the Neolithic, the spatial contacts between nomadic groups—mostly hunters and gatherers—and settled farmers had been extensive. Early rulers combined transcendent claims—namely that their empires were destined to include the “whole world”—with interconnections in the central areas of the Old World and stabilized them with trade (cf. Rehberg 2019).

A good example of how constantly unstable was this spatial control is the City of Babylon, which was continuously conquered, repeatedly destroyed, and rebuilt: dating back to its mythical period, there are Babylonian, Hebrew, Greek, and Persian narratives of Babylon’s history. As the most significant state foundation in the Tigris–Euphrates region, Babylon came under Assyrian (8th century BC), Persian (6th century BC), Hellenic (4th century BC), and Parthian (2nd century BC) foreign rule. This famous metropolis for a time had more than 200,000 inhabitants and was said to be the largest city “in the world,” flourishing numerous times in different periods, among them under the rule of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC), Nebuchadnezzar (1140–1127 BC), Cyrus the Great (6th century BC), and Alexander the Great (4th century BC).

While nowadays, invisible power structures increasingly show themselves in an apparently “spaceless” mediality, in earlier history, rulers longed for and determined their respective ranks by subjugating the largest possible territories. The large-scale early empires that defined themselves as “global” also often claimed the divinity of their rulers or an omnipotence associated with their divine supremacy on earth. This can be seen as early on as in “old Babylonian times” in the “best known Ballad of Early Heroes,” the lament of a mythical figure of divinity of the ancient Egyptian Hurrians (3rd until 2nd millennium BC):

Where is King Alulu, who reigned for 36,000 years?
Where is King Etana, the man who ascended to the heavens? . . .
They are no longer engendered, no longer born,
Like the remote heavens, I cannot overtake them,
Like the deep netherworld, no one can know them,
Life, in all its form, is but an illusion.

(Michalowski 2014, 165)

In the Sargonian Empire (2334–2154 BC), the most powerful rulers named themselves the “Master of the Universe” (Michalowski 2014, 151). Fustel de Coulanges (1877, 231) shows that in ancient Rome—long before the “Axial Age” so recently and prominently rediscovered (Eisenstadt 1986)—the dignity of the priesthood emerged, and even in earlier times central rulers invoked the idea of their closeness to the divine—from which they derived their own divinity and drew the conclusion that they could dispose of the world (Michalowski 2014, 151; Rehberg 2019, 38–40, 49–52). This is reflected in a wide variety of ideas and formulas that signify requirements with regard to heaven: in the “Sumerian Kings List” (Michalowski 2014, 155–156) of the third dynasty (2112 to 2004 BC), “kingship

was handed down from the heavens,” a concept of self that was still evident in the Divine Right of Kings claimed by European monarchs. This concept simultaneously distinguished genealogically and spatially, as Naram-sin’s (2273–2219 BC) claim to rule “extended to eternity” or the idea of a “*Roma eterna*”—albeit much later—exemplify. Typical metaphors for claims to world domination were images of a disposition of the whole space to the end of the world (Haubold 2013)—a rule over “four vertices” (Michalowski 2014, 155). Hammurabi (1793–1750 BC), the Babylonian “King of Justice,” had a monumental legal code carved into stone in order to make his universal rule visible to everyone and, at the same time, appropriating not only space but also time by postulating that his “name be remembered favorably for all times in the Esâgila temple in Babylon, which I love,” whereby he also regarded his city as the “Center of the Universe” (ibid., 153–154). The Assyrian kings also sought to expand their empire “beyond the shores of the sea” (Rollinger 2014, 199).

Cyrus II, “the Great” (559–530 BC) and sixth king of the Achaemenid Empire (Holy Bible, Isaiah 44.28, 45.1; Daniel 10.1; Ezra, 1.1–2, 1.7–8, 3.7, 4.5, 5.13–14, 5.17; II Chronicles 36.22–23), constructed himself simultaneously as the descendent of a long genealogy of rulers and as the “king of the universe, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters” and so on (Rollinger 2014, 191). The reign of Cyrus II was supposedly conferred on him by the God Marduk, whose name in the Old Testament means “Bel, son of the sun” and who in the course of history had changed from being the Babylonian city god to the father of the gods. Marduk appointed Cyrus as a just ruler, overlord, who called “all kings who sit on thrones, from all sectors of the world, from the upper sea to the lower sea” and from more distant districts to Babylon so that they could submit to him and kiss his feet. And yet, from a Jewish point of view, Marduk encountered an even more powerful deity—the tribal god Yahweh (Deutero-Isaiah 44, 23, and 45:1), who made Cyrus the tool of repatriation of the Jews held in Babylon (including the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem) and simultaneously confirmed his universal claim to rule. Similarly, when depicting the war campaigns to expand his empire, Darius (549–486 BC) announced that his empire extended to the shores of the sea that surround the world and claimed to have even conquered cities “beyond the sea.”

This way of affirming dominion in ancient Mesopotamia and Persia persisted until the Habsburg Charles V (1500–1558), who was said to rule “the empire on which the sun never sets,” a formula that was later used for the British Empire as well.

The process of conquests and appropriation of spaces and their ontological and practical importance started in Babylonian times and can also be observed in the Persian Empire (from 555 BC). Two hundred years later, Alexander the Great’s cosmopolitanism strongly influenced the Hellenistic world’s political and cultural landscape during the imperial expansion of Macedonia. The Roman Empire’s expansion of its imperial territory roughly half a millennium later can be understood as the process of the organization of large-scale territories “as the successor of

the great Empires of Old” (Yang and Mutschler 2008, 110). China and the Indian subcontinent can also be regarded as other formative examples for constructing large-scale territories.

Man’s ability to symbolically interpret and process realities is intrinsically entwined with the materiality, controllability, and, more importantly, uncontrollability of spaces: as spaces can be both life-giving or life-threatening, chances of human survival are necessarily connected to the culturalization of spaces. There are two main strategies of securing and stabilizing control over large-scale domains:

Assimilation includes forms of habitual alignment with the cultural center—for instance, both Babylon and Hellenistic Greece allowed for the integration of immigrants with local elites (Stevens 2016). Rome granted citizenship to nationals of the conquered states because “the Romans . . . showed an unparalleled readiness to incorporate subalterns into the metropolitan political community” and allowed for creating a “truly trans-regional aristocracy” (Lavan, Payne, and Weisweiler 2016, 23). The “previously powerful” were often drawn from the periphery to the central court, often with an increase in symbolic prestige and a simultaneous loss of power—a strategy that was used up until the times of Louis XIV. Incidentally, the ability of formerly mobile groups to self-assimilate should not be underestimated. Think of the Vandals, who have become proverbial as barbarian destroyers of Rome, whose leadership classes imitated and mimicked Roman customs in a special way and even tried to overbid Roman habits during their kingships in Carthage (after 429 AD).

Alternatively, space can be appropriated using various forms of *subordination* (Lavan, Payne, and Weisweiler 2016, 1–28), for example through the use of satraps or representatives of the central power and equipping them with regional and local titles, which could also be associated with relative autonomy. In the latter case, the residents who could not be homogenized by the central power lived in a wide variety of spatial conditions, customs, and traditions. They were hierarchically subordinate, but often their linguistic and cultic peculiarities were tolerated and acknowledged by the rulers. Similar processes had already taken place in Babylonia and in Macedonian-dominated Hellenistic Greece, namely through the integration of local elites into the imperial order, often combined with an identity dominated by the center. It is therefore also possible to work out different forms of manorial world disposition, which are closely linked to the conquest and the configuration of space.

As rule over conquered areas is risky and mobile forces pose a threat, it is also possible to stabilize territories by waiving expansion or shifting towards guaranteeing internal order. Applied to Rome, the term “imperial” is an ambivalent one. Thus, one could say that Rome became “imperial” twice: for the first time when it expanded its rule over “almost all the inhabited world” (Polybius I. 1.5), so that after the destruction of Carthage (146 BC) “sea and land lay everywhere open to its way,” and for the second time when Augustus ended the civil wars that had disrupted the Roman Republic and introduced a monarchical form of government (Mutschler 2008, 119). After unsuccessful campaigns against the “Teutons,” Augustus founded

the long-lasting “Pax Romana”—the pacification of the empire’s interior became the central goal of imperial rule (cf. comparative studies on the Roman Empire and the Chinese Empire in Mutschler and Mittag 2008). In a similar way, China’s later Ming dynasty (16th century) was characterized by a relative self-closure, which however is often overestimated: despite the “ideal of ‘Great Unity’” and the idea of rule “All-under-Heaven,” which emerged in the context of imperial unification in 221 BC, the Ming dynasty was also fragmented, comparable to a “multistate system” (Pines 2012, 11–16), and China never self-closed itself as much as Japan between the Tokugawa shogunate (1630s) and the forced opening of the country in 1853.

As already in the case of the Scythians (6th century BC) and the Parthians (4th century BC), the equestrian peoples from Northern Asia—such as the Huns and the Mongols in the 6th and 13th century AD—practiced expansive conquest for centuries. This was also the foundation of other struggles for great empires in the 8th century AD, including the Arab expansion from the Indus River to the Iberian Peninsula (711–719), which was finally halted by the Christian *Reconquista* of Andalusia. During its most intense phase in 1492, the violent displacement of the Arabs also resulted in the Jewish population being forced into exile. While the Germanic expansion into the Roman Empire is only perceived as the proverbial *Völkerwanderung*, the “Mongol storms” destroyed empires, such as in India where the Mughals installed indirect rule in the 16th century (comparable to later English colonialism). Later, between the 15th and the 18th centuries AD, the Turkish expansion continuously posed a challenging threat to the territories in Southeast Europe.

Land-based feudalism

Whenever hierarchical systems of land ownership emerged in agricultural societies, warrior elites would come into being and consolidate their power by establishing complicated formal relationships of granting protection and exploitation. This can be seen, for example, in the nomadic “overlapping” (*Überlagerung*; Gumpłowicz 1905, 28) of early peasants. After the division of the Carolingian Empire, in the 10th century, the process of “feudalization” involved splitting up formerly integrated domains. Norbert Elias saw this as a starting point for century-long territorial struggles, which—at least in France—finally led to a new centralization of land ownership and a royal position of authority binding everyone. Elias ([1939] 1982, 104–116) called this the “monopoly mechanism,” which—as a predecessor of the structures of modern statehood—led to a monopoly of tax collection and a standing military. As a consequence, claims of power were radicalized up to the point that Louis XIV enforced ceremonialization of his court in Versailles and thus paradoxically succeeded in separating the aristocracy from their land bases. In this way, agricultural land was merged into territories of sovereignty with complex internal structures.

Sociological system theorists in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann often overlook the fact that functional differentiations do not just exist in modern times. Instead, when combining the use of space with feudal stratification, societies have invented complex, highly differentiated and balanced systems (Rehberg 2017). Similarly, in

his classic analysis of the feudal system, Marc Bloch ([1939] 1982) assumes that the specific structure of power relationships induced how space was distributed and what effect these distributions of space had. Similarly, Fernand Braudel ([1949] 1996) did not assume that the geological–geographical material properties of space determined how the Mediterranean was constructed as a connection of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Instead, this connection was socially constructed by powerful actors and mediated by social structures.

Colonialism

In the “Eurasian” context, all spatial categories changed again radically due to the discovery of the “New World” (as it was aptly named from the European perspective), ushering in global European colonialism. During this period, the Popes co-created a “landless,” “meta-feudal” concept of a “universal lordship,” which seems to confirm Georg Simmel’s ([1908] 2009, chapter IX) argument that the state’s attachment to land is opposed to the universal “spiritual rule” of the Roman Church. The Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, however, “lent” the newly discovered lands in South America to Spain and Portugal, making the “landless” church an actor beyond its ability to proselytize the pagan masses.

During the age of modern colonialism, the world was redistributed by Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, later France, and, most pervasively, Great Britain, which “occupied the sea” (*Seenahme*), as Carl Schmitt ([1942] 1997, 47) hymnally described by quoting Sir Walter Raleigh:

Whoever controls the sea controls the world’s trade, and whoever controls the world owns all the treasures of the world and indeed the world itself.

Nation-building and geopolitics

When modern nations emerged—based on the rule over a demarcated territory and its inhabitants—new ideas of spatial exclusivity and the relationships between different states evolved. In science, this was reflected in new subdisciplines. For example, Friedrich Ratzel introduced “Anthropogeography” (1882, 1891) and “Political Geography” (1897). Both works naturally presuppose colonialism to be legitimate on the basis of racial categories. Ratzel (1897, 17) also links land-based states with the metaphor of a “living space” (*Lebensraum*) and argues that “every political entity seeks a connection to the ground.” The appropriation of space was always about power differences. These power differences, which “naturally” (*naturwüchsig*), as Karl Marx would have said, and “necessarily,” as Ratzel (1897) argued, linked conquest to colonization:

The size of the space we think and plan into politically depends on the size of the space we live in. . . . The large space encourages bold expansion, the small one leads to tentative crowding.

(*Ratzel 1897, 261, cited in Köster 1992, 126*)

Therefore, people would have to be educated toward expansion. Using these ideas, the Nazi regime later pushed the long history of spatial occupation to an extreme, and it was that kind of argument that Karl Haushofer—Ratzel's student and Rudolf Hess's confidant—used to justify Hitler's expansion plans. It is evident that the emerging modern nation states created new spatial competitions, which they justified using the semantics of past rule. For this purpose, Carl Schmitt—who was often described as the "Nazi's Crown Lawyer"—with stylistic bravery and dangerous acumen provided a legal justification for "large territories." From the perspective of fascist (and implicitly also Soviet) rule, Schmitt envisaged the rise of a new order that was linked to the old empires. In this view, Hitler's expansionism was meant to establish a new empire "of a thousand years" that was to determine the future of Europe and the world by breaking Britain's undisputed supremacy as the leading naval power—as Wilhelm II had already intended during the First World War.

When the European empires collapsed—the Russian Empire (1917), Habsburg Monarchy and German Empire (1918), the Ottoman Empire (1922) and 27 years later the British Empire (1945)—the mostly multiethnic and multicultural imperial domains dissolved and the number of nation states with nationalist delusions of grandeur increased even further. In the 20th century, ideologically founded "empires" re-emerged, such as the Soviet Union—which served as a multiethnic-state blueprint for working-class societies all over the world—or the fascist or National Socialist regimes. For example, Benito Mussolini tried to employ this kind of imperial strategy by cruelly conquering Abyssinia. The Allies' victory over Nazi Germany made reality of what Alexis de Tocqueville had already prophesied in 1835 (1961, 479)—namely that, according to a secret plan of the divine, the Russians and the Americans "each seems called by some secret design of Providence one day to hold in its hands the destinies of half the world." During the Cold War, both superpowers' priorities were no longer of an imperial nature but rather hegemonic: the Eastern Power dominated the "brother states," the United States the Latin American countries. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the number of nation states increased further to 193 members of the United Nations plus the Vatican, together with 12 controversial cases, resulting in a profound reorganization of European space as well.

Regardless, Ulrich Beck (2005, 7) was wrong when he claimed "Germany no longer exists; neither France, Spain, Italy, even Great Britain" and argued that imagining societies as contained by nation states was a model to overcome socio-logically (Beck 1997, 49). I believe that for a long time to come, nation states will continue to provide institutions of political legitimation and mechanisms for translating transnational decision-making for their own political system. Incidentally, it seems to me that the term "world society," as based on Niklas Luhmann's (1975) very plausible initial consideration that there is a "logical" limit to human communication, is misleading. First of all, it implies the development from "empire" to "world-state." However, the strategies of world domination described earlier show that these ideas already existed in ancient times (Weisweiler 2016). Second, Luhmann implicitly assumes that a global society already exists today. Although the

incomparably denser worldwide networks surely play a crucial role in shaping all current societies, this assumption seems problematic: the coronavirus crisis reveals the simultaneity of the *mondialization* of the spread of the virus and nationally distinct measures and fates of the people—validating the term “glocalization” coined by Roland Robertson (1994).

Interplay of social and sociological reflections on space

Making space invisible

Both “space” and “time” are key categories for defining humans’ relationship to the world. Both are simultaneously physical a priori and socially constructed. Depending on the historical times and cultural contexts, sometimes one category is stressed more, sometimes the other. “Time” is always highlighted during times of fundamental social change. This is by no means only true for the modern age. For example, just think of the chiliastic “Third Reich” of Christ’s return promised by Joachim of Fiore in the 12th century.

How the relationship between “space” and “time” is conceived is affected by the respective historical circumstances and *Zeitgeist*. It is characteristic for modern progressive societies and the way they self-reflect to dominantly treat “time” with a view towards a future to achieve anticipated goals, which starkly contrasts with past societies: with the exceptions of revolutionary turmoil or utopian visions of imagined futures, noble societies were oriented towards a genealogically affirmative past. All modernization theories are shaped by this manner of conceptualizing temporality. This fascination with the future is rooted in monotheistic religions, the secularizing enlightenment, and the associated changes in historical consciousness—Reinhart Koselleck (1972), for example, observed “a profound change in the meaning of classic *topoi*” in the *Sattelzeit* (“Saddle Time,” 1750–1850) and made this the starting point for the historical analysis of semantic changes in a multi-volume lexicon. According to Koselleck, since then, semantic changes of political and social terms have mainly been driven by a “temporalization of the categorical meanings” as well as their “politicization” and “ideologization.”

During the Industrial Revolution, new means of transport and machinery accelerated social life, which evoked fears and anxieties from early on. In 1843, Heinrich Heine wrote: “Space is being killed by the railroad and we will be left with time alone” (quoted by Günzel 2010, 204). At the same time, rapid urbanization caused an explosion of space that at the same time can be conceived as a diminution of space: “With the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space,” as Henri Lefebvre (1991, 95–96) put it. Other formulas claimed the “expulsion or erasure of time” and that “time has been murdered by society.” This dominant subjugation of space combined with the technical media-induced suggestion that space was diminished or even destroyed may have contributed to the fact that the domination-related categories of space seem to have lost their prominence today. As a result, power relationships are hidden, too. While it was once indispensable

to present power publicly, today power is increasingly becoming invisible (Rehberg 2014, 287–323), and this is reflected in the way the social sciences conceive “spaces,” and therefore also “places,” “territories,” and “empires.”

Concepts of space in social science

One of the key authors in the current sociological debates reflecting the relevance of space is Martina Löw (2001, 58–63), who—in reference to Georg Simmel—developed a relational sociology of space, emphasizing that space is constructed by “spacing” (Löw 2001, 158–161). Using this term, she describes placements based on perception, memory, efforts at synthesis, and the resulting abstraction processes. Simmel ([1908] 2009, chapter IX) had argued that no independent entities exist, since their social meaning lies precisely in the “structuring that is based on the soul,” in other words, in the psychological function of a “synthesis of the space.” That is why the term “place” is “purely sociological” and “absolutely nothing substantial or individual, but a mere form of relationship.”

Elisabeth Holzinger (2007) systematically compares different concepts of space and shows that in different phases of the theoretical debate, gains and losses of space are asserted to different degrees. Often, theorists conceive new technologies and global media networks as an “end of space.” Indeed, keywords like “globalization,” “acceleration,” “ubiquity,” and “virtualization” reveal an “atmosphere of de-spacing” (*Entraumstimmung*). At the same time, theorists perceived the forecast “loss of distance” and “proximity” as threatening. “Technologies transcending space” (*Raumüberwindungstechnologien*) co-evolve with digital stock markets in the economy and a refiguration of the relationships between decentrality and centrality. Together, they drive the fear that “space will be killed.”

Social theories also argue that industrialization in the 19th century induced a specialization of space—such as the separation of private spaces (the family, the home) from public spaces (workplace, political sphere), which in turn resulted in a “loss of proximity.” Note that the current COVID-19 pandemic has induced a recapturing of private spaces or, more precisely, real-life private places for professional and commercial purposes. The “loss of proximity” also changes forms of familiarity with spaces. For example, in big cities with an urban sprawl on the outskirts, space is often experienced as many small and unconnected “islands.”

Furthermore, extensive privatization poses a threat to solidarity or any kind of community. Arnold Gehlen ([1957] 1980, 59–65) predicted in 1957 that people would increasingly live from an “opinion as second-hand experience.” Today, more recent theories take up this idea when they discuss people’s increasing dependence on the omnipresence of the media, which in turn relates to all possible levels of experience and opportunities for action. In particular, humans are increasingly unable to influence larger-scale relationships. At the same time, the range of experiences conveyed by the media is expanding.

It is striking that the currently dominant concepts of communication seem to be completely aspatial, as exemplified by opposing theories such as those of Niklas

Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas and their respective adepts. Based on her analysis, Holzinger (2007, 62–66) proposes a typology of spatial terms with categories such as “material” versus “immaterial/abstract,” “one-dimensional” versus “complex,” “deterministic” versus “non-deterministic,” “rigid” versus “process-based,” and “absolutistic” versus “relational”. Her extensive research led her to a rather one-sided conclusion: “Space is not something that exists in itself, but a process of permanent (re)-production” (66)—the self-evident human condition, that all perceptions are constructs of the perceived matter, stands in opposition to the equally true claim of independent space as an inherent force.

Changes in terminology on spatial control

In the first part of this chapter, I traced the relationship between societies and space in an historical sociological analysis. Why is this of any relevance for today’s spatial sociology? I argue that humans are simultaneously exposed to spaces and actively create new spatial relationships, which they constitute by practices and experiences. The interplay of the two processes only unfolds in the *longue durée*.

This is not a new idea. Even in ancient Greece, the subjective constitution of spaces was a dominant theme. For example, when Aristotle reflected on human orientation, he granted reference to the cosmos as well as to different world models (Zekl 1992, 68). The permanent influence of spatial conditions on people’s lives necessarily implies that the way the *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer 1972, 44) conceives space cannot be thought of anthropologically without taking humans’ actions and sense-making into account. Humans also differentiate between spaces defined by their potentiality and specific locations (Rehberg 2006b, 45–47).

If the historicity of the relationality of actors and spaces is emphasized, then humans’ corporeality comes into play in a specific way. Helmuth Plessner ([1928] 1981, 360–365, 181–187) explained this connection between humans’ “eccentric positionality” and the resulting “spatiality” (*Raumhaftigkeit*) in his main anthropological work. Since the “spatial turn,” the influence of (natural) spatial conditions on social and cultural phenomena have been brought into focus again, and Markus Schroer (2006, 176) reminds us that “space [shapes] our behavior and . . . puts his stamp on” us.

Strangely enough, this has been criticized on several occasions. I disagree: this is not “geodeterminism.” Rather, relationality as a method should bear in mind that material or imagined space can have an effect. This does not mean that material space itself has no effect without being mediated by human interpretation, nor does it mean that material space is mere imagination. Instead, the challenge lies in understanding the interplay between the effective power of material objectivity and subjectivity. Due to living in cities built by humans, we may have lost our experience of the effects of natural space—and expressing this loss is often branded as outdated romanticization. Nevertheless, even today, when encountering our interdependencies with nature—for instance, in the high mountains, in the savannah, or in coastal regions at the mercy of the sea—the way we adapt to nature impresses our perceptions and affects our ways of defining, processing, and interpreting space.

It is well known that the Nazi regime not only killed millions of people and destroyed large parts of Europe, but also made many substantial words of the German language unusable, including *Nation* (“Nation”), *Heimat* (“homeland”), and *Raum* (“space”)—which in contemporary German do not spark associations with the familiar land and soil of one’s own origin but instead with the Nazis’ spatial expansion projects, such as the “SS Plan East,” which envisioned Aryanization (*Arisierung*), enslavement (*Versklavung*), and resettlement (*Umvolkung*). The imagery of this once murderous spatial policy is now used in populist and right-wing rhetoric to warn against the ethnic threat to its own people. This line of thought has a long tradition in the theme of a “shortage of space” (*Raumnot*) that made expansion seem a necessary task for Germany, which had been feeling enclosed in central Europe at least since the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). While German lands were destroyed, some great European nations in the second part of the 17th century experienced their “Golden Ages,” which caused an often conjured-up trauma. German philosopher and sociologist Helmuth Plessner ([1935] 1982, 17) even spoke in his book, *Die verspätete Nation* (with reference to German Nobel laureate in literature Thomas Mann’s *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*), of Germany as a country that “missed” the 17th century. In post-war Germany, this resulted in avoiding all German terms related to space, corporeality, and race. Even in institutions that had to deal with demographic issues, the categories used in analysis cause suspicion and discomfort. When politicians talk about “space,” they appear presumptuous, indeed revanchist. For example, the post-war dispute over the recognition of the Polish–German border conjured Hans Grimm’s (1932) propagandistic motto “People without Space” or Carl Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth* ([1950] 2003) or *Land and Sea* [1942] 1997). In order to discuss topics that can only be mentioned using taboo words, contemporary Germans often use the English expressions as a detour to avoid a certain historically charged tone, for example, “community” instead of *Gemeinschaft*, “leader” instead of *Führer*.

Global versus local life

Although social science discourse on space has dismissed many essential spatial categories, the current densification of the world and increased interconnectivity have not resulted in one unified monolithic culture but rather in a cultural syncretism combined with different ideas and practices (Pieterse 1998, 101). It is therefore fruitful to speak of “globality” and differentiate between “globality” as a real fact, “globalization” as a process of acceleration, and “globalism” as a neoliberal market illusion created by capitalism (Beck 1997).

Describing society as having evolved into a “global class” (Dahrendorf 2000) that lives “everywhere” seems more like a superficial bird’s-eye view from the perspective of transnational elites such as global players in the areas of diplomacy and transnational organizations, business, architecture or arts, and highly specialized natural scientists. For these elites, the world has actually shrunk.

Portable communication devices may even simulate this delimitation in the everyday life of the masses. Nevertheless, most people live locally—no matter how far they travel for their vacation trips with low-cost airlines. So, indeed, social life becomes more and more dense spatially and accelerates temporally. While at the beginning of cartographic representations fantastic monsters were needed to somehow enliven the blank spaces on maps, the blue planet can now be visualized right down to the last corner. In Google Street View, one can see streets and house facades. Using Google Earth, one can obtain an overview of landscapes or zoom into a living room. Above all, geographic information systems have been developed with multi-dimensional markings and layers of landscapes, integrating data about their history and much more. Transport, travel, and the imagination of personal accessibility to any place or territory at any time decrease spatial distance and thus create a feeling of a densification of the world, too.

In stark contrast to these processes, the worldwide right-wing populist movements, with their hate-fueling, contagious, and fearmongering rhetoric, have become the latest carriers of the call for an uprising of the “sedentary.” Underlying this process is a class struggle because, at an objective level, social inequality has been increasing and the opportunities for overcoming it have been decreasing, while subjective values and aspirations are converging on a global scale (Rehberg 2006a).

Apocalyptic spatial materiality?

With the exception of the analysis of the Egyptian and Asian hydraulic cultures, scientists have rarely taken into account the role of ecological conditions of space for the rise and fall of great empires. However, at various periods, European intellectuals have projected their fears about uncontrollable influences over society onto the decline of Rome. They pointed out its decadence, decay of morals, extensive militarization, increasing contrasts between poor and rich, and failure as a state. One of the causes for the decline of this ancient empire was also the depletion of natural resources. Adam Ferguson, in 1766, or later Justus von Liebig, postulated that at all times it is the land that “holds human society together or drives it apart and makes nations and states disappear or makes them powerful” (Demandt 1984, 348). Alexander Demandt argued that depletion of the soil resulted in the impoverishment of free farmers over “plantation cultivation of large landowners with their troops of slaves,” leading to increasing grain prices and finally to a population decline (*ibid.*). Georg Sigwart hypothesized in 1915 that the decline of Sparta, Athens, and Greece in general and the decline of Etruria, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire were all caused by the leaching of the soil, leading to “impoverishment, inflation and a reacting despotism” (*ibid.*, 349). In this view, every culture that produces a desert eventually annihilates itself.

Today, in the—rather repentantly than proudly—so-called Anthropocene, most people are—at least abstractly—aware of the fact that nature increasingly seems to push back against being permanently forced into submission by humankind or, as the

Vulgate and Luther's Bible presented it, as a mission directly out of the mouth of the world's creator: to "subdue the world." Key terms of the anticipated ecological disaster include "global warming," "desertification," "acidification," "overfishing of the oceans," "destruction of rainforests," and many more. The United Nations estimates the livelihood of 1.5 billion people to be under threat, and humanity literally "is losing its footing" (Latour 2018, 13): climate is changing and will cause an increase in natural disasters, as has become noticeable in recent years, even in Central Europe.

These essentially humanmade phenomena require us to develop new perceptions and categories of spatial presence and perceptions, as nature intrudes into the virtual spaces of comfort provided to us by the media. One might think of the return of an unsolicited presence of space, which is no longer a symbol of great power but rather of a self-inflicted impotence. Jakob van Hoddis had already anticipated this in a vibrant expressionist manner in 1911 (1977):

World's End

From burgher's pointy head flies the hat.
In all quarters resounds hullabaloo.
Roof tilers plummet down and break in two.
Along the coasts—one reads—the floodings rise.

The storm is here, wuthering seas are hopping
Ashore to crush dams as if they were midges.
Most people have a cold that is not stopping.
The railway waggons tumble down from bridges.

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