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# Questions of Locality

Doreen Massey

*ABSTRACT: This paper explores issues surrounding studies of 'locality' and 'place'. Reasons for the renewed emphasis on such studies are examined, before consideration of two controversial aspects. The first is the charge of parochialism, which is contested. It is argued that, when conceived in a particular way, locality studies can be at the heart of a geography which is truly internationalist, both in its recognition of geographical uniqueness and difference, and in its analysis of the (unequal) relations which bind different places together. Secondly methodological issues are examined, and it is argued that, far from being confined to description, locality studies pose productive theoretical challenges.*

The issue of locality, and of the closely related – indeed sometimes indistinguishable – concepts of place and region have in the last few years figured prominently on the geographical agenda. The question of place and locality has been central to a major programme of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.<sup>1</sup> There have been storms of debate about the appropriateness of this focus, about the intellectual frameworks needed for geographical analysis of such phenomena, and indeed about the very definition of place/region/locality in the first instance. Finally the notions of place and locality figure prominently, as geographical concepts and as foci for the organisation of the teaching of geography, within the National Curriculum.

There are many factors which seem to be important in explaining this new (or renewed) emphasis. A number of authors have in recent years expressed the view that geography stood in danger of losing its appreciation of the differences between places and its ability to explain those differences in real depth. This argument is not merely one which derives from an emotional attachment to the specificity of place, although it certainly has strains of that within it; but it has other sources, too. On the one hand there is the argument that a greater attentiveness to geographical variation, to difference, is a necessary component of a wider social project of greater comprehension of other parts of the world. Thus Gregory has written:

one of the *raison d'être* of the human sciences is surely to comprehend the 'otherness' of other cultures. There are few tasks more urgent in a multicultural society and an interdependent world, and yet one of modern geography's greatest betrayals was its devaluation of the specificities of place and of people (Gregory, 1989, p. 358).

It is in the context of arguments such as this that calls have recently been made for the rebirth of (a re-thought) regional geography. Moreover, the reference in the quotation

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from Gregory to “the human sciences” generally rather than only to geography points to a larger issue. For ‘difference’ (and the need to be attentive to it) is a word which is currently sweeping through almost all the social sciences. And one focus of the geographer’s attention to difference is that between places.

There are other reasons, too, why locality/place/region is now more salient within the discipline. These include perhaps a feeling that some of the theoretical approaches which have been dominant in recent decades (from the mathematised regional sciences to certain forms of Marxism) have tended to be insensitive to specificity. There is also the fact that, both in the United Kingdom and internationally, the last twenty or so years of economic and social change have involved a profound geographical restructuring. It has been very obvious, for instance, that changes at national level which may go by one name (‘Thatcherism’, for instance, or ‘monetarism’) will often have quite different resonances, and result in quite distinct effects (not only economic but social, cultural and political as well), in different parts of the country. Thus it became important, in order to assess and understand the impact and meaning of those ‘national’ phenomena, also to go down below the national level and investigate their variability with place. It was concerns of this nature which were an important part of the thinking behind the initiation of the ‘localities’ research programme (Massey, 1991a). And there have been other reasons too for the greater relevance of locality: the greater communication between (and understanding of the integral relations between) economic and social geography, a greater emphasis on cultural issues, and in ways which linked in to other parts of geography (Jackson, 1989), a greater appreciation of the need to start from the position of human agency, to understand the dynamics of daily life in its local to-ings and fro-ings. . . .

I should perhaps declare from the start that this interest in locality/place/region is one which I share and support. However I do so with some strong caveats which should be borne in mind in what follows. Firstly, I am very wary of ‘fashions’, and of overly-strong swings of emphasis and interest as people follow them. The calls for a new focus on localities and a new sort of regional geography are not calls for those foci to dominate geography at the expense of other things. Indeed, as will become clear in what follows, other aspects of geography are absolutely indispensable to any serious focus on the understanding of place. A focus on place/locality/region is just one, perhaps until recently neglected, aspect of ‘the compleat geographer’. Secondly, the new salience of locality has provoked considerable discussion, in seminars, conferences and journals, and not a little disagreement. In the sections below I shall pick up and analyse some of these debates. But it seems to me that what their very existence highlights is a tension at the heart of the debate about the way in which we do locality studies. Many of those who are wary of such studies would argue that they are necessarily parochial in content and ‘merely’ descriptive in form. I shall argue below not only that they need not be either of these things but that they should not be, and I shall try to demonstrate how. But there is no doubt that such dangers exist. The question, then, is how to avoid them.

### **A focus on the locality need not be parochial**

In educational circles it is sometimes argued that students relate more easily to studies of things which are local to them, including – within geographical studies – their local areas. The argument is made that they are likely to be more interested in the local and familiar. I am personally somewhat sceptical of this argument (I have always been equally fascinated by the far-away). But there is no doubt that linking one’s teaching into the concrete reality of daily life can ‘bring messages home’ in a particularly forceful way. Of course studies of locality can equally well be of places on the other side of the world, but wherever they are they run the danger of being ‘parochial’. A parochial way of studying a

locality is one which focusses exclusively on the place itself, which tries to define a unique identity for that place and where the notion of a 'sense of place' resonates with romanticism and nostalgia.

*A non-parochial view of place*

But there is another way of studying localities which is precisely the opposite of parochial. This is the view of locality which stresses its linkages with the wider world. These links exist in many ways and at many levels and they are not just products of the modern era. The sources of the food, the clothes and goods in the shops will be global; the petrol in the garage links in to some part of the world in the news; the ownership of 'local' companies will certainly not all be within the area; the reason for a recent closure or redundancies may be traceable to competition from elsewhere; in many areas the mix of the local population will display a variety of non-local inheritances. Even in the most 'undisturbed', most 'local', little village in the middle of nowhere the church tower or steeple rises to honour a god whose son was born in far-off lands, in now disputed territory.

The point is that there are today very few, if any, places in the world, and certainly none in the UK, which can be at all satisfactorily understood or explained in isolation from the wider context, both national and international, in which they are set. The nature of such links will range across the spectrum of the concerns of human geography, from economic (through trade, and products, ownership and influence), to political (the impacts of decisions made elsewhere, perhaps, from Maastricht to the GATT negotiations) to cultural (the films on at the local cinema or the thoughts of home in the heads of people as they go about their daily, apparently local, business: thoughts of the North in those who have come south in search of work, stories of Cyprus heard in the families of those who emigrated years ago). These things tie one locality to many others in a myriad different ways. Moreover, they are more than 'links', they are part of the constitution of the place, part of what gives it its own particular character.

Furthermore, the existence of such links is rarely new, although the nature of them will have changed over time. Patrick Wright, in his book *On Living in an Old Country*, writes of the way in which so many local histories are told: the place was first mentioned in the Domesday Book, it had ten villanes ... and so on, through a stately progression of changes all of which are bounded by the local area itself (Wright, 1985). Such history is indeed 'parochial', seeing only the place itself. Thus a history of that now-disputed bit of country called London Docklands could be written as a story of fields giving way to docks and working-class housing, and then in turn ceding place to high-tech offices, finance-houses and 'executive' residences. But to tell the history so would be to miss a lot of what gave the area its shape and its character, and to miss, too, much of the explanation of that history. For the story of the change from docks to finance houses is also the story about the area's changing place in the world, from port and processor at the heart of one of the world's biggest empires to a vital communications and finance link in the chain of late twentieth-century world cities. In each period the area played a distinct role in a particular international division of labour. And each period left its mark and traces of the international links, from street names to the mix of the local population.

The point of thinking of localities in this way is to stress that their formation, and their character, cannot be understood merely by looking at the place alone. Any serious understanding of any one place necessitates standing back, taking a broader view, and setting it in a wider context. In this way even studying one's own local area can be the opposite of parochial; it can indeed really make more concrete the links between 'us' and 'them', and to understand not only how the local is affected by the global but how the actions of 'local people' at 'local level' are fully implicated in, and thus have some responsibility for, events in, and conditions of, people in lands which may often seem remote.

For 'links' with other places are really relations of interdependence and, moreover, of an interdependence which is rarely equal. What need to be analysed are the aspects of domination, subordination, influence and power which these links embody. Through an analysis of these one can understand the reality of a locality's 'place in the world' and a good deal of what make it what it is, what gives it its identity.

### *The identity of place*

For if all this is so, then the question of what is meant by 'the identity of place' must also be set in a wider context. For identities, too, are formed in part by the history of relations with other places. Those 'links to other places' do not just allow us to follow them in order to discover what lies at the other end (though that is a useful pedagogical function); they are also part of what gives any place its character. It is impossible to understand what it is to be 'British', for example, to understand the identity of the place the UK, without deeply appreciating the impact of the world role which the country has played upon the character of these islands themselves. The quintessentially 'English' cup of tea was born out of the actions of the East India Company, and sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

It is in this way that interdependence contributes to uniqueness (Open University, 1985). Indeed interdependence and uniqueness can be understood as two sides of the same coin, in which two fundamental geographical concepts – uneven development and the identity of place – can be held in tension with each other and can each contribute to the explanation of the other.

Moreover, and in part because of this, the identities of places are constantly changing as new products of history, new effects of the role of the place in the wider scheme of things, are added to the old. What is meant by talk of 'the real Lancashire'? A picture immediately rises into view of proud cotton mills and huddled terraces (some variant of a Lowry painting); yet cotton has been important for only a hundred and fifty years of the history of that part of the country, and dominant for even less.

### *A sense of place*

Yet when one refers to a 'sense of place' it is not these analysed histories which are so relevant but rather the feelings which people carry round with them. There are many others who have written widely on this issue, and Stephen Daniels considered it recently in *Geography* (Daniels, 1992). But there are two aspects of the debate which relate to that over localities. Firstly, there will in all likelihood be more than one 'sense' of any particular place. In the Hackney of which Patrick Wright was writing the white working-class has a very different notion of the area, different meeting places and routes through it, even different understandings of what is its past, from either the ethnic-minority communities or the gentrifying middle-classes. In Docklands the working class of the Isle of Dogs thinks in terms of Millwall while the incoming yuppies compose images of status, of pioneering, and of 'the Venice of the North'. Even in localities which appear seamless, such as mining villages, a woman's sense of the place, for instance, is likely to be very different from a man's. The sense of what is 'Britain' to a second-generation inhabitant of Brixton is likely to be in contrast to that of denizens of the villages of the Cotswolds.

Moreover while sometimes those distinct senses of a place can happily coexist, through mutual ignorance or through regular patterns of negotiation, sometimes they may be contradictory and even erupt into conflict. In Hackney the memories of the white working class, the images they bring to mind when thinking of how the place ought to be ('the real Hackney'), are rudely interrupted by the unwanted arrival of new groups, both ethnic-minority and middle-class. In Docklands the occasional bouts of spray-painting of expensive cars are witness to the sharp end of a clear conflict not only about what is, but about what should be, the identity of the area and its dominant sense of place.

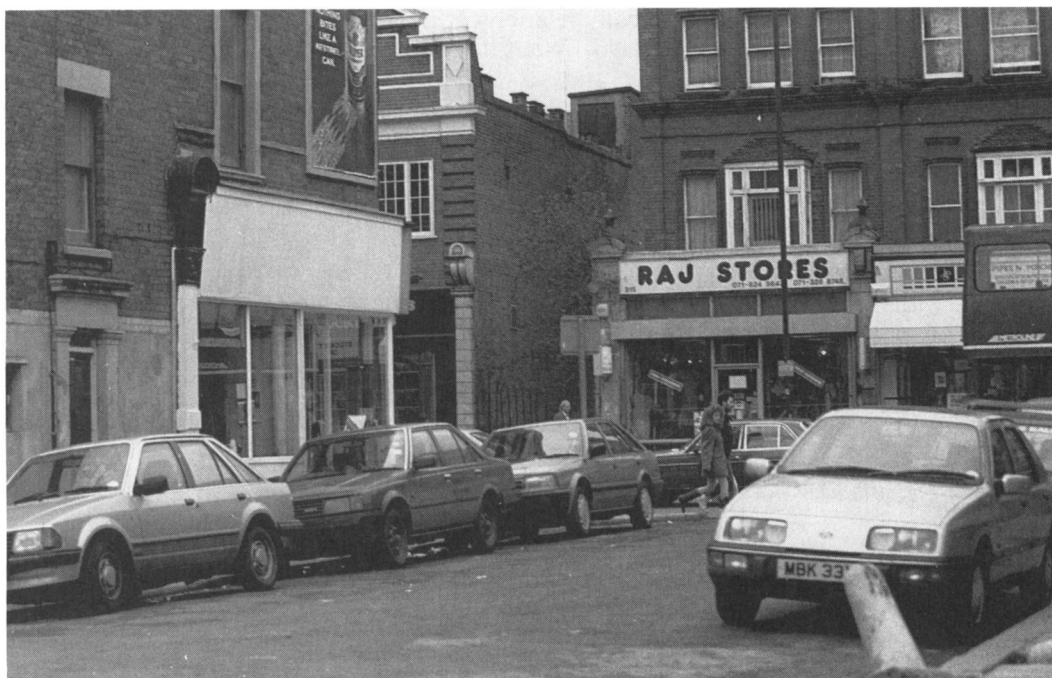


Fig. 1. Reminders of Empire in Kilburn. Photo by the author.

Further, and this is the second point, a sense of place – just as much as the understanding of its economic or demographic structure or the ‘objective’ analysis of its identity – can be in part constructed out of consciousness of the locality’s place in the world. When, on Saturday mornings I walk down Kilburn High Road to do my shopping, the IRA graffiti and the Irish pubs, the Indian sari shop and the notices for Muslim gatherings, as well as the constant snarl of traffic which tells that this is the main route from the centre of London to the M1, all make it impossible to think of Kilburn without linking it in to centuries of the history of the British Empire and places half a world away (Massey, 1991b) (Fig. 1). The very feel of Kilburn, my sense of it as a unique place, is in part constructed precisely out of its global (as well as wider national) connections.

Moreover, such a sense of place, constructed through interaction rather than through closure, is *important* to establish. For a sense of place which assumes it is unique and eternal, and constructed only out of materials found in that place, can be a dangerous thing. At one end of the spectrum, too coherent and final a sense of place can be used to keep a community-care hostel out of a well-heeled suburb (“it really doesn’t fit in with the character of the place”). At the other it can lead to nationalist nostalgias and horrors such as ethnic cleansing.

The challenge for geographers is to retain an appreciation, and an understanding of the importance, of the uniqueness, of place while insisting always on that other side of the coin, the necessary interdependence of any place with others.

### Description and explanation

Among the criticisms which have been made of locality studies is the charge that methodologically they rely solely on ‘description’. The burden of the accusation is that no theory is involved. There are many ways in which such a charge should be questioned.

Most evidently, it is many years now since the notion was challenged that there is any such thing as 'mere description' in the sense of a description which is devoid of any theoretical content. It may well be that such theoretical content will be implicit only, and that it may not even be recognised by the author, but it will inevitably be there. There is no such thing as a totally neutral description uninformed by a world view of what is significant and of how phenomena are linked together. Further, the recognition of this has been developed into a fuller recognition of the potential of description and of the different forms which it can take. 'Thick description' involves complex issues of interpretation and precisely incorporates an understanding that any reality can be interpreted in a range of different ways (Daniels, 1992). So the attachment of the adjective 'mere' to description is no longer seriously tenable. Nonetheless studies of localities can fall into the trap of 'bad' unselfconscious description without explicit recognition of the theoretical framework on which it rests, the explanatory structures which it assumes, or the issues which are at stake.

Any serious geographical enquiry into place or locality, however, most certainly requires explicit theorising. A simple 'contemplation of the local' will not do.

#### *Theory and locality studies*

Constructing a notion of locality, or an understanding of any particular locality, is a theoretical challenge. It means combining together understandings drawn from many branches of systematic geography.

At the broad level, that of understanding the wider forces which link the locality to the world beyond, it is necessary to draw on an understanding of national and international processes. To understand the economic character of a place is in part to bring in to play theories of location, to understand the role of the locality in wider spatial divisions of labour and broader patterns of trade. It is necessary to see the locality, in other words, in the whole context of uneven development. To understand the particular population mix it may be necessary to go back to studies of migration, and the histories of other places (Ireland, maybe, as in the case of Kilburn, or the countries of the Commonwealth), to study the break-up of Empire maybe, or inter-regional and urban/rural patterns of migration within the United Kingdom itself. To understand cultural changes it may be necessary to be sensitive to broader geographies of cultural influence, on a worldwide scale and at an intra-national level. A serious analysis of the foundations of a place, in other words, behoves that we draw upon all the theories of spatial change that geography has at its disposal.

But some of the critics of locality studies accused them of being descriptive mainly on the simple grounds that they are 'local', which is to say small-scale. This, however, is to confuse the nature of theory. Theory and explanation does not only concern itself with the big broad structures, of capital accumulation at the global level for instance or regionally uneven development at the intra-national. Local, small-scale phenomena are equally amenable to, and demanding of, theorising. The functioning of local labour markets and housing markets, the dynamics of gender relations, the functioning of local households and their dominant structures all require theorising at the specifically local as well as the broader level, because it is at the local level that many of their most crucial processes operate.

#### *Explaining the unique*

But if none of these criticisms of locality studies as a-theoretical hold water, (or should not do so if locality studies are well carried out), the final charge is that in the end particular, individual, places are not amenable to analysis precisely because they are unique. The hey-day of regional science thinking within geography produced the aphorism that "there is little one can do with the unique save contemplate it".

The current resurgence of interest in localities looks set finally to undermine this view. One can, of course, contemplate the unique, and one can delight in it, but one can also go some way towards explaining it. Indeed since every actual event in time and space is indeed unique we would be in a poor way if this were not so.

So what are the sources of the uniqueness of place which we should as geographers address? They are numerous. There is the very fact of uneven development itself, which means that most broader social forces, whether they be economic or cultural or whatever, in fact occur unevenly over space. So simply from the operation of broader mechanisms places will be different. Moreover if we take up the argument of the first section, that places are the product of the intersection of social relations (most of which will have a broader geography than the place itself), then part of the uniqueness of each place derives from the fact that nowhere else has quite this particular intersection. Only in Kilburn is put together quite this set of relationships with Ireland, the Caribbean, the North of England and the rest of inner London. Moreover, the very fact that things are brought together in space, in place, often produces further effects. The meeting in Docklands of yuppies and the manual working-class has had effects on the opinions and the actions of both groups. This, indeed, is one of the ways in which it can be said that the spatial organisation of society has an effect on the operation of society. For the happenstance juxtapositions which occur in place will often result in further social processes, and add another component thereby to the uniqueness of that locality.

The uniqueness of place, of course, derives also from the history of the area but meant here in the sense of a history seen as a succession of roles in, and links to, the wider national and international context. And here we come full circle, for it is this existing differentiation which is part of the basis for the construction of uneven development, as the uneven articulation of the new combines with existing places, the products of specific histories. Finally, and most importantly, all these sources of uniqueness are more than the inexorable playing-out of structural forces. They must be viewed, too, not only as the results of human agency but also through the lens of "what people have made of it", what they have constructed as their lives in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

#### *Places as exemplars*

There is one more way in which a focus on a particular locality can link in to wider theoretical debates. This is when its study is used either to highlight or to investigate in more detail processes which are occurring on a broader scale. A locality may thus be used as a laboratory for exploring issues in depth. Or it may be selected as being exemplary of particular sets of forces or changes. Los Angeles, for instance, has been used by a number of writers (as well, for instance, as film-makers) to exemplify the hypothesised shift from a modern to a post-modern society. This is the city, so it is argued, where can be seen most clearly and in most abundance tendencies which are particularly characteristic of these times. Most places, if in less spectacular ways, can be studied, not only for their own sakes, but as specific exemplars of some more general phenomenon whose investigation as part of the complexities of the particularity of place enables a closer analysis of its real workings.

### **But what are localities?**

The stress that has been laid here on the openness of localities, on their construction on the basis of links *to* the outside rather than demarcation *from* it, inevitably raises the issue of boundaries. Geographers seem to love drawing boundaries. And yet in principle this approach to the notion of locality makes any form of boundary-drawing difficult. Rather, places are best thought of as nets of social relations.



Moreover, what may best be defined as a place for one purpose – a focus on the housing market perhaps, or on a particular network of social relations – is not necessarily the best for another – a study, say, of gender-relations. Even the notion of a sense of place will not solve the problem, since it has already been argued that these will be multiple and may well have different geographies.

Localities in the sense discussed here are always provisional, always in the process of being made, always contested. In an issue of a journal devoted to cultural studies and national identity it has recently been written that a “Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in Paris, for example, surely does not qualify as part of French national identity. A McDonald’s outlet in Kyoto hardly expresses the Japanese ethos” (Schiller, 1992, p. 21). The truth of the statement is indisputable. And yet . . . these new cultural imports have to be understood as following older ones, and not as invasions of what had previously been an internally-coherent, pristine, purity. New arrivals, new connections, are incorporated, moulded, over time. This does not mean that ‘anything goes’, that there is no role for any notion of conservation or preservation. However it does mean that there should be debate about the terms and nature of both preservation and innovation. And this in turn should take account, not just of the nature of the ‘character of the area’ but of how that character was formed in inextricable linkage to other places (the well-heeled area organising to resist the community-care hostel lives in direct relation to the inner city from where the new residents will come). Such considerations take us into wider realms of social debate and politics. And debates about localities, their meanings and what should be their futures, are one of the geographical arenas in which such social and political issues are condensed.

#### NOTE

1. The research programme on *The Changing Urban and Regional System*, The Economic and Social Research Council. See, for instance, Cooke, 1989.

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