

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Walter Nicholls, Byron Miller and Justin Beaumont (eds)**, *Spaces of Contention: Spatialities and Social Movements*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7778-9 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-7546-9526-4 (ebook)

The publication of *Spaces of Contention* marks a milestone in the establishment of a research field focused on the geographies of social movements, a research field which has firmly placed spatiality at the heart of debates over radical social change. During the last 20 years that geographers have been researching social movements and activism (Routledge 1993; Miller 2000; Nicholls 2009) spatiality has become a central concept to fellow scholars across the disciplines (Tilly 2003; Juris 2008; Castells 2012) and to activists themselves. Indeed, contemporary social movements are emphasising the spatial in both their discourse and practice, from the global Occupy movement (Shiffman *et al.* 2012) and multiple struggles over urban space in the Mediterranean region (Fregonese 2012) to the practices of taking space that have been so central to Latin American movements (Zibechi 2012).

Walter Nicholls, Byron Miller and Justin Beaumont's collection contains 12 excellent chapters, each of which presents original research that demonstrates the ways in which different spatialities - 'place and space' in Part I; 'scale, territory and region' in Part II; and 'networks' in Part III - have been central to particular social movements. The geographic scope is impressive, with detailed case studies from seven countries across four continents, as well as numerous examples of transnational movements. Notably, the contributors include some of the world's leading scholars in the field, and the reader is exposed to some of the most groundbreaking research concerning the relationship between space and social movements (see the table of contents [here](#)). In this review I make no attempt to summarise the diverse contributions - I urge you to read the book itself - and instead want to briefly examine what I consider some key achievements of this collection, explore some of the tensions underlying them, and discuss a useful debate that's little mentioned in the book.

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The overriding aim of *Spaces of Contention* is to explore the different ways in which “space plays a constituting role in social movement mobilization” (p.3). This is an important advancement since the last groundbreaking text in the sub-discipline, which opened by lamenting the *missing* geography in social movement research and justifying its importance (see Miller 2000). The contemporary debate is not *if* space matters to social movements, but *how*. In a seminal paper, Leitner *et al.* (2008) argued that researchers have tended to prioritise particular spatialities of contentious politics, such as scale, place or networks, and that the current challenge should be to acknowledge the *multiple* spatialities that constantly act on each other. Nicholls *et al.* adopt this frame of analysis, recognising the importance of multiple spatialities to social movements, although noting that “they are not always equally important at all times and in all kinds of conflict” (p.12).

A key achievement of this book is thus its ability to emphasise *both* the ways in which social movements simultaneously produce multiple spatialities (for example, through the diverse spatial strategies of neighbourhood activists or the new scalar practices and networked organisations of the global justice movement), *and also* the ways in which particular spatialities come to prominence in specific contexts (for example, the production of territorialities by Colombia’s black communities or the transnational networks of resistance against Coca-Cola). Across the different contributions there seems to be a broad agreement on the diversity of spatialities produced by social movements; a diversity that highlights just how dynamic and creative activists can be.

In the conclusion, Byron Miller looks to recent arguments that we should move away from understanding social movements through their multiple spatialities, and instead focus on the production of their emerging assemblages (see McFarlane 2009; Davies 2011). These arguments claim that social movements are not mobilised through particular spatialities, but rather emerge through a constant (re)assembling of human and non-human actants (for example, resources such as leaflets or websites). Agency is thus seen not as operating through activists and their particular spatial strategies (such as place-based mobilisation), but as located in the emergent properties

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of the assemblage itself, whose outcome cannot be determined by one spatiality or another.

Rather than getting bogged down in the ontological and epistemological differences between this approach and the critical realism that underlies much of the book, Miller seeks to reconcile them by re-conceptualising the spatialities of social movements as ‘spatial technologies of power’. These technologies are dynamic processes of re-working power relations, constantly being produced by movements in order to strategically intervene in the particular contexts they find themselves in. Overall, then, this collection can be seen as an argument for the continued potential of building a more holistic and open approach to conceptualising the geographies of social movements.

In their desire to build an integrated approach to this research field Nicholls *et al.* deal with a diverse range of political approaches, which inevitably raises certain tensions. Whilst the heterogeneous politics of social movements is celebrated, it is also acknowledged to be a source of significant antagonism that poses challenges both to activists as they seek to build coalitions, and also to researchers as they struggle with how to conceptualise these political rifts. Several contributions provide interesting ideas for ways of incorporating the political antagonisms of social movements into our research on their spatialities. For example, updating her influential work on ‘place framing’, Deborah Martin argues that researchers should expand their attention from the *analysis* of social movements towards an appreciation of their *practices*. Doing so may allow us to more fully acknowledge the contrasting political contexts through which activists themselves choose to generate certain spatial strategies. In a similar vein, Dingxin Zhao examines the student mobilization practices of the 1999 anti-US Chinese protest and highlights how the spatialities produced were very much dependent on the differing, and often antagonistic, relations that students had with their unions and the Chinese state more generally.

The importance of acknowledging political differences is well demonstrated in Margit Mayer’s chapter on contemporary struggles over the ‘just city’, in which she considers how movements fighting for the ‘right to the city’ are fraught with

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significant rifts between the more reformist, top-down coalitions of certain NGOs and UN institutions and the more radical critique of the grassroots global justice movement. Mayer argues that in building integrated approaches to the geographies of social movements we must ‘politicise’ these spatialities, and have “an acute awareness of the political meaning of sociospatial categories” (p.166). Indeed, as Paul Routledge and colleagues point out in their chapter, most social movements are divided by political ‘faultlines’, of which the famous distinction between vertical and horizontal organisational logics has been one of the most longstanding. Whilst so-called verticals strive to create spaces based on hierarchical structures and the ‘taking’ of power, horizontals strive for autonomy from political structures tied to the state and seek to produce spaces of self-managed consensus. Through their research on global justice networks, they argue that we need to remain attentive to the “ongoing antagonisms related to power, language [and] authority” (p.281) that are entangled in diverse operational logics. *Spaces of Contention* thus demonstrates that an integrated approach to researching spatialities and social movements has to constantly grapple with underlying political tensions. A central task to take forward is both to make visible and map out these antagonisms in our research, highlighting how spatialities are never neutral, and also to examine the potentials and limitations for different spatialities to bridge these divides.

Whilst the collection is able to conceptualise heterodox social movements within an integrated research approach, it has much less to say on the different methods we could employ for doing this. Indeed none of the contributors explain in any detail the methodological choices they make, with only the occasional mention of methods used (for example, archival research or interviews). This lack of methodological engagement is no doubt due to the book’s already large focus on how to conceptualise spatialities and social movements, but it has the consequence of leaving out debates that have played an important role in the development of research on activism in recent years. Firstly, there have been arguments for a need to adopt participatory and militant methodologies that move beyond the false distinction between theory and praxis (Fuller and Kitchen 2004; Croteau *et al.* 2005; Shukaitis *et*

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*al.* 2007), a debate in which contributors from this collection have been active (see, for example, Mitchell 2004; Routledge 2004). By discussing the relationship between theory and practice one hope is that research projects such as *Spaces of Contention* could serve not only as scholarly interventions but also provide practical resources for social movements themselves (cf. Bookchin *et al.* 2013).

Secondly, there have been attempts to confront questions of ethics, trying to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher in relation to the movements they study, and indeed to society more widely (Lynn, 2003; Gillan and Pickerill 2012). Although some contributors provided hints at their relationship with their cases - including Paul Routledge's participant observation with People's Global Action Asia, or Andrew Davies' ethnography with pro-Tibet activists - there was no discussion of positionality and what we might call the researcher's complex 'geographies of responsibility' (Massey 2004). Are we doing research *on* movements that we choose to distance ourselves from, or are we actively researching *with* and alongside them, and if so where do accountability and reciprocity come in (see Gillan and Pickerill 2012)? Moreover, what is our relationship to the relatively well-resourced institutions who are (likely) funding our research (see The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010)? Understandably, *Spaces of Contention* could not address all of these issues, but a greater acknowledgement of the positionality of the researcher and the methodological choices made might have been useful not only to address ethical concerns, but also, as Miller states in closing the book, "to build more effective movements for a better world" (p.296).

In conclusion, *Spaces of Contention* is a landmark text that doesn't just bring together leading international scholars of the geographies of social movements, helping establish this as an important field in its own right, but seeks to move the agenda forward by reconciling contrasting approaches in a holistic and generous way. In doing so, it opens up further challenges to think through the ways in which we can build an integrated approach that acknowledges, even celebrates, difference whilst making visible the political antagonisms that exist within and among social movements. Each of the 12 contributions would be an impressive 'stand-alone' text

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and together they provide an enormous wealth of material that I have not had space to explore in this review, but urge you to engage with yourself. A book of this scope is inevitably not going to be able to deal with all the debates surrounding spatialities and social movements, but I have highlighted the need to not marginalise discussions on methods and ethics. Spaces of contention are not only produced by social movements 'out there', but are intimately entangled with the research process. At best, research can be seen as a weapon of social movements in the ongoing struggles over the production of spatialities through which we build new relations and values. Nicholls *et al.* have taken forward an essential research project. Let us not forget that this is simultaneously an activist project, creating spaces for the worlds we want to live in.

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*September 2013*