Revue indisciplinaire de sciences sociales
Espaces Temps.net

Spatial practices, theoretical implications.

Par Mathis Stock. Le 31 mars 2015

Geography has been engaging since the beginning of the 1980's with the question of spatial dimensions of practices. There is now a lively tradition going back to the work of Raffestin and Racine (1983) on the geographical approach of everday life through practices, Thrift's (1983) spatialisation of practice theory, Pred's (1986) work on the practice-constituted qualities of place, Werlen (1997) on everyday geographies as "praxis of worlding" (*Praxis der Weltbindung*), and Lussault's (2007) theory of spatial acts as ensemble of spatial competences and narratives. We find a split (or division of work) between theories of practices that are considered as non-representational, and thus only refer to bodily performances (Thrift 2004), and theories of practices in which representation as symbolic grounding of spatial dimensions in a Schützian tradition are produced (Werlen 1993). This significance of practice theory is interesting within the context of a so-called "spatial turn" in social sciences, where different disciplines turn more and more towards grasping social life and cultural change through spatial thinking.

Yet, despite those important achievements, performed through the import and discussion of many theories that originate in other disciplines, geography disposes only of partial conceptual frameworks, which are about individual practices or collective actors, about everyday life (such as routines) or the extraordinary (such as tourism), or about space/practice bundles or practices *in* space. In this context, Schatzki's contribution is a timely attempt to propose a specific interpretation of the spatial dimensions of practices. It allows for relating geographical theory to philosophies of practice, as it allows for philosophy to take advantage of geographical thinking. In this Traversal, he formulates the central thesis of spaces of practice allowing for large scale phenomena to take place. Three questions can be raised : 1) is the expression « spaces of practice » an adequate formulation of the way different spatial dimensions are at stake in practice ? 2) what are the consequences of such formulation for geographical theory ? 3) which are the methodological consequences on geographical work ?

A critique of "spatial practice".

"The juxtaposition of the terms 'spatial' and 'practices' is apt. For practices are inherently spatial phenomena, and the spaces pertinent to social life are ever increasingly the product of practices.

The social practices that make spaces themselves are and have spaces" (Schatzki 2015). This is indeed the way geography frames the problem : since spatial dimensions are co-constitutive to practices, we term them "spatial practice". Yet, the following question immediately arises : since practices also have individual, social, symbolic and temporal dimensions (to take along Norbert Elias's (1996) five-dimensional model of society), is it necessary to speak of "spatial practices" or wouldn't it be more adequate to speak about the spatial dimensions of practices ? The same is true of the expression "social practices", since every practice is embedded within a specific societal configuration, that can be historically different, etc. Practice is therefore not *a priori* "social" or "spatial" or "socio-spatial" as in the famous formulations of the 1980's, but its relevant dimensions are chosen according to the specifically adopted theoretical perspective.

A second question can be raised : are there spatial practices because they "make and have spaces" (*ibid*.) or are there spatial practices because multiple spatial problems co-constitute practices ? Following Schatzki, "its spatial component embraces arrays of places and paths anchored at material entities, where a place is a place to perform such and such action and path is way from one place to another" (*ibid*.). Practices are conceptualised as relying on places because they are localised, and on paths, because mobility is involved. But what about the multiple relationships to space (*Raumbezüge, rapports à l'espace*) that practices involve, perform and express ? Sense of place, identity with place, spatial competences of humans, geographical imaginary, spatial techniques and symbolic dimensions of places are absent in Schatzki's account. The spatiality of practices rather than the spaces of practices could indicate the effects the co-constitution of space/practice has. Potentially, this idea is present through the assertion that "practices are *intentionally* related to arrangements, furthermore, through both the thoughts and imaginings participants have about them and the actions they perform toward them (including using them)" (*ibid.*).

However, isn't the main problem of the spatiality of practices much more diverse ? For Schatzki, spatial configurations, places and paths are keywords. However, if place and paths only are at stake, there is the risk of losing sight of the variety of spatial dimensions. Practices are at stake as relationships not only to space and place, but also to distance, location, boundaries, placing and displacing, scaling, bio-physical world and landscape, territory, arrangements etc. Various actors and actants solve and raise problems through spatial resources (such as spacing capital), which are more diverse than the fact practices take place in a physical world of spatial arrangements.

The variety of spatial dimensions also raises the question of the proper conceptualisation of space. Here Schatzki seems to follow a Heideggerian tradition that distinguishes "space" and "place", where dwelling means establishing "a relationship to places and through places to spaces" (Heidegger 2004, p. 152). Despite the consensus within the contemporary Anglo-american geographical tradition as space as an objective spatial arrangement and place as forming of subjective meanings, there are other ways of distinguishing and associating an array of spatial concepts. Firstly, we could understand space as a concept of a high degree of synthesis (Elias 1996) that focuses on the relationships to the distance-dependent ordering of elements : the question of distance, quality of place, landscape, location, orientation, accessibility, placing, displacing, enveloping, location, place, territory and so on, because place and space are not the only relevant problems. Secondly, following Werlen (1995), space is a "formal and classifying concept" and not an empirical-descriptive one, which allows for the grasping of problems concerning the relationship to the material world. Thirdly, Derrida's (1993) idea of "khôra" being indeterminate — "there is khôra, but *the* khôra does not exist" (*ibid.*, p. 32) — allows for a transposition to the concept of space : "space" is indeterminate. Fourthly, in human socities, space

takes a specific quality : it is inhabited, that is co-constituted by practice and invested by meaning, and not only a question of an arrangement of “things”. The practice/space nexus could therefore be underlined through the concept of “dwelling”. The problem of the spatial constitution of practices could therefore be brought further.

Schatzki provides a theory of bundles, which tie together practice and spatial arrangements in order to form spatial configurations : “The bodily movements that occur when people perform the doings and sayings that compose a practice, together with the material entities that form arrangements bundled with that practice, form an objective spatial configuration” (Schatzki 2015). Therefore, practices are not seen as separated from space, neither is space considered separated from practices. The analytical advantage lies in articulating what has traditionally been conceived as two opposing blocs. It further allows for an understanding of spatial arrangements that function only through practices. An Italian *piazza* seen as practice/space arrangement allows for a view where the *piazza* does not pre-exist from the practices allowing it to function, whereas in traditional approaches, the *piazza* as container space is seen as first support, then practices take place within or on the surface. Another example is related to tourist resorts, which have been analysed as simple arrangements of material elements, whereas the analysis of practice/space bundles performed especially by tourists allow for an understanding of urbanisation processes, civility, norms, i.e. the inhabited character of the seaside. This potential of analysing in a systematic way the space/practice bundles in order to understand how places are inhabited appears to be a step forward. Practices do indeed “make space”.

Consequences on geographical theory.

Geography has been engaging since 30 years in the replacement of structural models by action-oriented models in order to describe, explain and interpret spatial arrangements, the production of boundaries, urbanisation processes, the consequences of space-time compression and space-time distanciation, globalisation, the performance of relationships to nature, mobility, etc. Instead of modelling fluxes and structures, geographers tend to think through the perspective of practice stemming from various theoretical traditions. Schatzki’s contribution allows for articulating in a different way the problem by focussing on the practice/space bundling. Therefore, the bundles of practice/space become an adequate research object that geographers can distinguish among the empirical manifestations of the world. And this is a theoretical challenge because often these elements have been apprehended as separated. Schatzki makes the claim “that practice-arrangement bundles have and make spaces” (*ibid*.). Already known within other theoretical propositions, this statement nevertheless has important consequences for geographical theory. First, if we form the cognitive project to analyse spatial arrangements, then practice is not to be neglected. For instance, production of urbanness through practices, production of tourist places through practices, public space as produced through practices, etc. Every single spatial arrangement is seen as co-constituted by practice. This conceptual framework could allow for interesting insights in economic geography, social geography, cultural geography, political geography as well as in urban geography, tourism geography, etc.

The question of large-scale phenomena, the micro/macro and local/global distinctions are of great importance, however difficult they are to acknowledge for a geographical theory. Schatzki (*ibid.*) advocates a “flat ontology”, whereas geography advocates different levels of representation of social reality. In fact, geography has been informed by cartographic reason (Olsson 2007) through the distinction that has been drawn between the *cartographic scale*, which represents a solution for

the problem of representation of parcels of the Earth on a sheet of paper, and the *geographical* scale, which signifies the problem of level of observation and level of regionalisation (Haggett 1981). There is a third way the large-scale phenomena have been conceptualised : space defined as arrangement of substance, scale, and metrics, which means the co-constitutive bundling of modes of measures of distance and the extent over which spatial arrangements are envisaged (Lévy 1999). Thus, there might indeed be “flat ontologies”, but the geographical observer may still need to adjust scalar representation for solving specific problems. As point of view of the observer, we have thus a distinction to draw between levels of observation and levels of existence of objects. A good illustration is that of cities that are always sprawling and thus have an ever-changing extension : if the whole of the agglomeration is to be grasped, an adjustment to the extension must be made. We have therefore three questions of scale or of level : a cartographic scale, a measure of relationship between grandeur of objects, and levels of observation.

Schatzki’s criticism of the cartographic reason makes him make a step forward in order to think together elements that are traditionally separated.

Instead of examining social life through the idea of distinct, systematically related levels, it is better to think of a single plenum of practices and arrangements that varies in the thinness and thickness, and in the directness and circuitousness, of relations among practices and arrangements. As defined by these variations and gradients, practices and arrangements form bundles and constellations of smaller or larger spatial-temporal spread. This ontology promotes, as a key dimension of variation in social phenomena, not micro/macro or global/local, but smaller and larger. (Schatzki 2015)

The micro-macro distinction Schatzki uses as an “opposition” that has existed as such in social sciences for more than 100 years might be problematic because there are actually more differentiations than this two-fold distinction. How, in social theory, can the large-scale phenomena be conceptualised ? “Configuration” and “field” are but two of the concepts that have been developed and that also imply spatial dimensions (yet implicit). Robertson’s (1994) concept of a “global religious field” stemming from Bourdieu’s field theory or Elias’s concept of a “configuration” shows how links can be drawn to existent social theory. This makes Schatzki’s statement less convincing : “All these positions presuppose the integrity of the two levels” (*ibid.*). In Norbert Elias’s model of interdependency of humans (1970), individuals are seen as two different foci, but not different realities, on the one hand humans are seen as singular, and on the other as plural. Yet, if we are to utilise this formulation for the analysis of global extension of phenomena, what insights could we gain ? Tourism as a global arrangement of tourists, firms, resorts, norms, local workforce, spatial technologies, imaginaries could be seen as a constellation of practice/space bundles operating on a global scale.

This “smaller and larger” problem also raises the question of historicity. Wouldn’t the globalisation or “space-time distanciation” (Giddens 1990), i.e. changing ways of organising ever larger phenomena, be an important question to ask ? The capacity of bundling practice/space over the globe is a specific performance of humans, and the process of globalisation is the process of growing larger. This processual view could help not only to understand social phenomena as a constellation of bundles, but also as a process of constituting practice/space bundles. It is interesting to see how the spatial extent defines the large or small phenomena : “social phenomena consist in slices or aspects of practice-arrangement bundles. Large social phenomena, accordingly, consist in spatially large slices or aspects of such bundles, indeed, in slices or aspects of *constellations* of bundles” (Schatzki 2015). This is an interesting formulation that allows for the

understanding of what has been termed “scale” in previous geographical attempts of conceptualising the different spatial extent of social phenomena. It would also explain why the spatial dimensions are as crucial, both as a theoretical tool and as an empirical constitutedness of phenomena : “A constellation of bundles, consequently, is just a large bundle, a large linkage of practices and arrangements. The difference between smaller and larger social phenomena is the difference between lesser and greater spatial extension of the practices, arrangements, and relations that compose them” (*ibid.*).

How could we grasp these bundles of practice/space ? What are the consequences on geographical methodologies ? Investigating practices is now a common methodological problem within geography, and the use of qualitative research techniques has become pervasive. Yet, practices are too often approached without the spatial dimensions, thus giving away the specific geographical advantage of the observation of practices as containing also spatial problems. How can we build a methodology for practice/space bundles of large social phenomena ? For instance, which methods and approaches should we use to research the processes of globalisation conceived as the extension of practice/space bundles, for example in sports, tourism or finance ? How specifically can the globalisation of cities *via* the emergence of global centralities be approched as processes of practice/space bundles with the constitution of global configurations ? These questions are yet to be answered.

Bibliographie

Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Khôra*. Paris : Galilée.

Elias, Norbert. [1970] 1978. *What is sociology ?* New York : Columbia University Press.

—. [1986] 2007. *An Essay on Time*. Dublin : Dublin University Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford : University Press.

Haggett, Peter. 1981. *Geography. A Modern Synthesis*. New York : Harper & Row.

Heidegger, Martin. [1952] 2004. « Bauen, Wohnen, Denken » in Heidegger, Martin. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, p. 139-156. Stuttgart : Klett-Cotta.

Lévy, Jacques. 1999. *Le tournant géographique. Penser l’espace pour lire le Monde*. Paris : Belin.

Lussault, Michel. 2007. *L’homme spatial*. Paris : Seuil.

Olsson, Gunnar. 2007. *Abysmal. A Critique of Cartographic Reason*. Chicago : Chicago University Press.

Pred, Allan. 1986. *Place, Practice and Structure. Social and Spatial Transformation in Southern Sweden : 1750-1850*. Cambridge : Polity Press.

Raffestin, Claude and Jean-Bernard Racine. 1983. « L’espace et la société dans la géographie sociale francophone : pour une approche critique du quotidien » in Paelinck, Jean H. P. and Alain Sallez (dirs.). *Espace et localisation. La redécouverte de l’espace dans la pensée scientifique de langue française*, p. 304-329. Paris : Economica.

Robertson, Roland. 1994. « Religion and the Global Field » *Social Compass*, vol. 41, n° 1 : p. 121-135.

Schatzki, Theodore. 2015. « Space of Practices and of Large Social Phenomena » *EspacesTemps.net*, Traverses.

Thrift, Nigel. 1983. « On the Social Determination of Action in Space and Time » *Society and Space*, vol. 1, n° 1 : p. 23-56.

—. 2004. « Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect » *Geografiska Annaler*, 86B, n° 1 : p. 57-78.

Werlen, Benno. 1993. *Society, Action, Space. An Alternative Human Geography*. Londres : Routledge.

—. 1995. *Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierungen. Zur Ontologie von Gesellschaft und Raum. Tome 1*. Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag.

—. 1997. *Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierungen. Globalisierung, Region und Regionalisierung. Tome 2.* Stuttgart : Franz Steiner Verlag.

Article mis en ligne le mardi 31 mars 2015 à 08:17 –

Pour faire référence à cet article :

Mathis Stock, »Spatial practices, theoretical implications. », *EspacesTemps.net*, Travaux, 31.03.2015 https://test.espacestemps.net/articles/spatial-practices-theoretical-implications/

© EspacesTemps.net. All rights reserved. Reproduction without the journal’s consent prohibited. Quotation of excerpts authorized within the limits of the law.