

Place

Concept: Place

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Description The word "place" is so ubiquitous in everyday language that we seldom reflect on its meaning. People describe Jamaica as a beautiful place to take a vacation, invite friends over to their place to eat, and put children in their place when they disrupt the dinner party. Human geographers, however, have probed beyond these everyday, common-sense uses of the term to theorize place as space that has been invested with meaning. They outline three important aspects of place as a meaningful location.

First, place has a location, although that location may change. We can describe where that place is located and find it on a map, whether it is a stationary city or a moving train. Second, place has a locale. Locale refers to the concrete material setting of a particular place. For example, your bedroom has four walls, a door, and hopefully a window and closet. All places, therefore, have a material dimension, even when they are imaginary places like J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. Finally, place is related to people's ability to invest it with meaning. When we are emotionally attached to a particular place, like our home towns, it evokes in us a "sense of place." Although it is often difficult to describe what it is like to "be there," novels are most successful when they evoke in readers some sense of what it is like to be in a particular place at a particular time.

Perhaps contrasting place with space will help clarify the former term. Space is a more abstract concept than place, a "fact of life" analogous to time. It has an area and volume, but it remains undifferentiated. Abstract space only becomes place when it is invested with meaning and value. Geographers argue that naming is one of the most common ways that space is transformed into a meaningful place. For instance, in Jamaica Kincaid's book *A Small Place*, she describes how British colonialists, in their "discovery" of Antigua, named local streets after British maritime heroes like Nelson, Rodney, Hood, and Hawkins as a way to transform foreign space into a new British place.

In the current context of globalization, many people perceive a quickening erosion of place. As global trade, media, technology, and mobility act as homogenizing forces in the world, many aspects of life occur in spaces that look identical around the globe. Airports, for example, or hotel rooms and shopping malls are similar the world over, sometimes confusing travellers about where they are when they wake up from a deep sleep after a long airplane flight. Because these uniform spaces or "non-places" seem disconnected from the local setting and do not orient people in a particular local environment, they do not produce a sense of attachment to place.

While many people bemoan this development, business travellers increasingly rely on uniform global spaces as a way to negotiate the complications associated with cross-cultural interactions.

Contrary to this trend toward the disappearance of place in the context of globalization, we can detect a simultaneous surge in the deployment of place. Travel companies urge us to explore the "real" Ireland and Bermuda. Global financial institutions encourage investors to save for a dream home or family cottage get-away. Land developers increasingly build gated and retirement housing projects. And if given the chance, many city dwellers will move to a less stressful place in the country. But one of the most apparent connections between globalizing processes, place, and identity is seen in the activities of immigrant communities, which increasingly employ global communication technologies to maintain a link with the land of emigration as an important aspect of identity formation in the adopted homeland.

Place, then, is a contested concept within the social condition of globality. While place is threatened by the stretching of social relations, activities, and exchanges around the world, it also remains a salient way to define culture and identity, to protect people from a sense of alienation in a globalizing world, and to arrange everyday life and make it meaningful. The question that will continue to intrigue geographers as they study processes of globalization is what place means in a world increasing characterized by global interconnections, flows, and spaces.

Suggested
Reading:

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