Politics *in suspenso*: Reading Antje Schlottmann's RaumSprache from the 'North American' Container

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Antje Schlottmann is one of a growing number of young German-speaking scholars who, while fully steeped in their own linguistically-specific traditions, also have substantial mastery of the English-language human geography of the last three or four decades. Like their Anglophone counterparts, these geographers have delved ever more deeply into the literatures of critical social theory, feminism, poststructructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on, in order to search out relevant and useful insights and arguments. However, given the different starting points and ongoing problematics orienting their research, they have done different things with these ideas. Making a more serious effort at dialogue, as the present forum aims to do, will not only broaden our sense of what is being done elsewhere. It can also provide a healthy sense of the contingency of the trajectories taken in Anglophone human geography.

To take an example relevant to Schlottmann's book, it is not too much of an over-simplification to say that in the UK, North America and the Antipodes, the rise of feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, critical race and non-

representational theoretical approaches has taken place at the expense of, and often via direct critiques of, grand critical social theory in the tradition of Giddens, Habermas, Berger and Luckmann, etc.[2] In German-speaking geography, by contrast, the reception of all the "posts" has not succeeded in discrediting or dislodging grand theory, and in fact Giddens and Niklas Luhmann, to take two important examples, continue to serve as touchstones for dynamic theoretical developments. Beyond emphasizing the contingency of developments in either tradition, what does the contrast tell us about the compatibility between work grounded in grand social theory and the more partial approaches that have gained currency in English-language academic communities? How are the tensions that must mark any such dialogue potentially creative? Antje Schlottmann's book offers a suitable occasion to explore some of these questions. I return to them after a summary and critical reading of her argument.

RaumSprache

The argument of *RaumSprache* (which I will translate colloquially as "SpaceTalk") is carefully and systematically worked out across 343 pages. Schlottmann's aims are, first, to explain how spatial usages deeply embedded in both everyday language and scholarly discourse are crucial resources used (in a largely unreflexive way) by social actors as they continually make and re-make geographical realities, and second, to explore some of the social effects of SpaceTalk. Habitual identification of bounded regional units, habitual associations of specific locations with specific qualities or characteristics of the people residing there, repeated use of spatial metaphors in describing and dealing with social reality, all of these and other common practices are examples of SpaceTalk. Schlottmann's argument is divided into three parts. In the first, she develops the outlines of a theory of "significative regionalization" based centrally on Benno Werlen's work but also drawing on Anthony Giddens and Anssi Paasi. Her starting point is the now-familiar claim that a new age of borderless, globalized modernity has superseded the previous age of bounded spaces. In Werlen's conception, the survival of references to space as an independent reality made up of national or regional "containers" is a matter of vestigial and obsolete language whose non-correspondence with reality becomes ever-more manifest. In a highly effective

[2] The writings of Karl Marx, arguably the grandest of grand theorists, and his inheritors form the chief exception. David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Neil Smith, Richard Walker, Allen Scott, Linda McDowell, Don Mitchell, Richard Peet, Julie Graham, Kathy Gibson... the list of high-profile geographers who continue to be strongly influenced by Marx is impressive. The contrast with German-speaking human geography in this regard is dramatic, and would be worth exploring in much greater detail.

critique, Schlottmann takes issue with this characterization, arguing that spatial references survive because despite their generally unreflected use (by scholars as well as by the lay public), they play a key enabling role for socially embedded individuals as we make sense of our worlds. This critique requires some additional work, however, because Schlottmann wants to retain Werlen's insistence on the fundamental competence of individuals. Arguing for the central role of unreflectively employed SpaceTalk in the socially constitutive activities of individuals raises the spectre of heteronomous determination, a concept not easily accommodated in Werlen's version of action theory. The length of Part I (and some of Part II as well) is accounted for to some extent by the argumentative gymnastics Schlottmann feels obliged to perform in order to portray SpaceTalk as something other than a species of causal determination not in the control of acting individuals. Read from within the Anglophone discourse, where the structure–agency debate has long since ceased to occupy critical human geographers, these are the passages in the book that seem least necessary. However, as I argue below, Schlottman's work offers an occasion to reconsider the apparent obsolescence of the issue.

The first part of *RaumSprache* ends with a careful look at a three-page-long text collage made up of phrases, sentences and short paragraphs culled from German press coverage of the issue of German reunification and the question of the continued existence of real or imagined differences between East and West Germany. The book is introduced with this collage, but the iterative analysis awaits completion of each of the three parts of the book. Thus each of the subsequent two parts of the book also concludes with a return to the same text collage, and each re-reading provides a deeper layer of interpretation of the role of SpaceTalk in structuring German reality. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the book, as it provides a very effective way to keep the systematic theoretical development grounded in empirical examples. The initial reading after Part I focuses on the ways in which spatial language in press coverage, *regardless of ideological perspective*, consistently undergirds and reproduces the assumption that East and West Germany, as well as Germany as a whole, *exist*.

The second part of the book deepens the theoretical account of how language, and SpaceTalk in particular, produces and reproduces geographies. Another encounter with the issue of structure and agency yields concepts of intentionality and background owing much to Searle's speech act theory, and carefully calibrated to avoid both causal determinism and voluntarism. This is followed by a look at the (mass) media as an institution of significative regionalization. As in the earlier critique of the revolutionary character ascribed to globalization, Schlottmann argues here that whatever the new technological forms they take, media in the information age do not in fact, as is often supposed, contribute to a dissolution of traditional understandings of space and spatiality. Quite to the contrary: their large audiences make them particularly efficient *reproducers* of traditional spatial conceptions. In the latter half of Part II,

Schlottmann begins to define a set of analytical categories capable of classifying the ways in which language establishes spatial frameworks: "indexicality" (the projection of qualities or contents and projection of qualities onto locations), "toponymy" and "metaphor" all specify linguistic spatializations. The empirical text collage serves once again as a touchstone, allowing her to deepen her reading of how 'East Germany' not only *exists* but is literally *shaped* in language.

The third and final part of *RaumSprache* is the strongest, gathering up all the foregoing insights to offer a detailed account of the ways in which significative regionalizations acquire the ability actually to construct social reality. Schlottmann's discussions of the "meaning of meanings," the "institutionalization" of spatial usages, and "iteration" are very valuable, as is the subsequent extended chapter detailing the role of SpaceTalk in the construction of practical social problematics currently occupying the German body politic (integration and immigration policy, "home region" [*Heimat*] and regionally-indexed personnel policies). The last substantive chapter returns a final time to the text collage, and offers an extended look at how SpaceTalk acts as the unacknowledged basis for the constitution, organizational meanings and moral meanings of the spatial units East Germany, West Germany, Germany and the populations assumed to be identified with these regional delineations.

Politics in suspenso

In moving away from grand theory, much of Anglophone critical human geography has come to focus more intently on the related concepts of power and politics (broadly defined). Schlottmann links this development (as have many other scholars) to the linguistic and cultural turns in Anglophone human geography. But with respect to the shift away from the structure-agency paradigm, the *politicization* that has accompanied the cultural turn is more important than the textual turn *per se*. Put crudely, work in feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial geography during the 1990s made it increasingly clear that neither term of the structure-agency duality is of much analytical use in the un-marked, abstract, universal form in which the issue had been debated in the 1980s. The important thing about subjects striving to make lives and worlds is not the abstract philosophical principle according to which we are all competent actors always able to do otherwise but the concrete, *positioned and marked* performances through which we (re)produce or transform specific social meanings. And the important thing about the structures that prevent differently positioned subjects from doing or being just anything we want is not their general presence and effectivity in every social formation but their specific characteristics as contested and contestable social constructions, constructions often originating with dominant social groups. Anglophone critical geography has in a sense substituted the much more concretely oriented duality of social construction and performance for the structure-agency

duality. Both structure and agency are always already marked and specified by power relations, which (like "action") are to be found everywhere but are *not* therefore empty or meaningless. One corollary of this shift is that the problem of the role of social scientists in (re)producing social reality has generally come to be perceived less in the general, abstract terms of the "double hermeneutic" and "reflexivity," and more in political terms borrowed from Gramsci or Foucault ("organic intellectual," "specific intellectual").

Schlottmann's reliance on the language of social theory limits the extent to which she is willing to see power relations as fundamental, and thus also limits the depth of her analysis of power. She portrays power in the more interesting trans-individual sense as something that enters the ongoing process of significative regionalization at an analytically late stage, specifically, when basic features of SpaceTalk (indexicality, toponymy and container metaphors) gain solidity through institutionalization and the second-level ascription of social meanings. To simplify somewhat, SpaceTalk is portrayed as a *condition of possibility* of the properly political, rather than as always already political through and through. Thus the impression arises that acting subjects and the background they share somehow constitute a pre-political community. This impression is reinforced by the way in which Schlottmann constructs the text collage, stringing together spatial references from newspaper coverage of the East / West divide without any identification of sources, and thus 'de-positioning' the public discourse. In the absence of what might be termed "political indexicality" (*this* text by *this* author appearing in *this* newspaper), political dynamics remain confined within the cramped axes of the structure-agency debate. Likewise, progressive politics is reduced to the project of increasing the freedom and autonomy of abstractly-defined, un-marked acting subjects while reducing the degree of constraint imposed by anonymous, general social structures. Since, in this view, subjects have always had significant ability to act otherwise in every situation, empowerment is chiefly a *discursive/cognitive* process of increasing the reflexivity of social actors and encouraging them to recognize this ability.

I do not wish to suggest that Schlottmann ignores politics in the more concrete and partial sense. On the contrary, it is precisely because she sees SpaceTalk as a condition of possibility for the very real political discriminations plaguing German (and other) societies that Schlottmann spends so much time exploring these issues toward the end of the book. But, to put it somewhat provocatively, approaching political problems as though the most needful thing is to increase the reflexive awareness individuals have of their own ability to make a difference involves a misleading projection of the positionality of the relatively privileged onto the whole of society. Schlottmann's use of the neutral language, and involvement in the problematics, of grand social theory tends to mask the crucial importance of positionality in favour of an abstractly conceived universal subject. The political project of defending the autonomy of this subject *in theory*

blocks a full engagement with the social politics of *differentially constituted* subjects *in practice*.

Schlottmann might object that defending the autonomy of the subject is not automatically a matter of politics but of rational theoretical argument. However, in Foucault's conception, for example, social theory, too, may be understood as a thoroughly political practice. Indeed, his later writings on governmentality and the politics of subjectivity provide an interesting lens through which to consider Schlottmann's own commitment to action theory. Mitchell Dean (1999), Nikolas Rose (1999), and Barbara Cruikshank (1999), among others, have elaborated on Foucault's discussions of "neo-liberal governmentality" as a set of practices aimed, in different but complementary ways, at producing free, responsible and autonomous subjects. In general terms, their argument is that the free, empowered individual is in important ways a product of such mundane practices as childhood education, self-help schemes, popular self-improvement literature and responsibilization programmes run, for example, by insurance companies (e.g. discounts for non-smokers). Such practices support and are loosely lent credibility and tied together by more general ideological narratives produced in the media and academia. None of these devices are *imposed* upon individuals, but are offered to us and often eagerly taken up in our own projects of *self*-government. So there is nothing sinister going on here that would suggest individuals are merely unwitting pawns, or that individual benefits resulting from the energetic pursuit of self-realization schemes are merely ideological illusions. Nevertheless, as Foucault suggested and as his inheritors have shown in more detail, these neo-liberal technologies tend ultimately to reinforce the existing social order with all its injustices and inequalities. Freedom, in other words, is not only (or even primarily) a basic, pre-political attribute of all human subjects but an historically variable and specific rationality of (self)governance. However, and this is a key point to bear in mind, even viewing neo-liberal freedom as a technology of governance does not rob it of all positive value as a goal. Rose (1999), especially, makes a strong case that even once we recognize that the free modern subject is a political construction, it is difficult to imagine any path toward a better society that does not involve advocating an increase in individual freedom.

In line with this general approach to technologies of the self, social theories that make the inherent autonomy or competence of acting subjects a central presupposition and/or conclusion can themselves be seen as instances of neo-liberal governmentality. Schlottmann is very clear that she sees her work as embedded and involved in the social reality she analyzes, and her commitment to enhancing the freedom of individuals (especially disadvantaged individuals) is genuine. But to confirm this is not to deny that her project can be seen as essentially neo-liberal in its effects. For in a general sense, the more social reality is understood (and its problems addressed) by making individual empowerment and responsibilization the central issue, the more difficult it becomes to recognize and address dynamics

and problems at the trans-individual level. Some social problems continue to be genuinely structural, that is, while they of course involve individual perceptions and actions, this is not the level at which their important causal features emerge.

Second thoughts

The foregoing critical comments focus on only one aspect of *RaumSprache*, leaving out what are arguably its more important and potentially useful features, which would remain valuable even if Schlottmann had not linked them to a defence of subject-centred action theory. After dwelling briefly on these strong points, I will return once again to the politics of grand theory, and suggest that certain strands of Anglophone critical geography could benefit from re-engaging with some of its central issues. Space limitations (the container metaphor, of course) prevent me from doing anything more than suggest avenues of further dialogue.

On the first point, the analytical categories Schlottmann develops to understand how geography-making involves significative regionalizations are very useful regardless of who or what is understood to be the analytically important moving force behind the process. For example, the principles of "placing" (*Verortung*) summarized in Table II-4 (p. 182) provide a clear and systematic overview of how indexicality, toponymy and metaphors of "near vs. far" and "containers" have structuring effects in establishing cultural-spatial unities, evaluating social acts by means of proximity and co-presence, and naturalizing borders. These analytical concepts could enrich ongoing discussions in research on governmentality and the geographical constitution of biopolitical social-material bodies (see Clayton, 2000; Edney, 1997; Hannah, 2000; Luke, 1996; Murdoch and Ward, 1997). Research in this area has tended to focus on specific technologies of spatialization such as censuses and maps, but some of these studies could be drawn into more fruitful engagement with each other by recasting these specific technologies as different means of significative regionalization. It might be useful, for example, to compare and contrast the systematically different ways in which travel writing and maps draw on orientation and container metaphors in constituting geographies. The insights derived from such work would be valuable even if one did not subscribe to Schlottmann's bottom-up model, according to which institutional facts, such as structure, discourse or identity, are explained fundamentally in terms of the everyday actions of individuals, which generate institutional solidity through repetition (see Table III-1, p. 229). Because Schlottmann is forced to conclude that significative regionalizations normally do not involve fundamental challenges to inherited SpaceTalk, setting aside the whole focus on acting subjects would only require a re-*interpretation*, not a re-*consideration* of her empirical results.

Schlottmann's presentation is also valuable for its systematicity. Anglophone critical geographic research has tended to respond to the linguistic turn in recent years by shifting to a narrative, sometimes journalistic style. However, a deconstructive sensibility need not rule out systematic conceptual architectures such as that developed in *RaumSprache*, which have the advantage of allowing us to build comparative bridges between specific research contexts. The now ubiquitous qualification to the effect that things are "different in different contexts" is in danger of becoming an empty mantra in Anglophone discourse. Generalizations, as Schlottmann so effectively argues, cannot be dispensed with entirely, and instead of struggling to avoid or reacting allergically to general conceptual schemes, it might be worth reconsidering the potential benefits of resorting to some of them (with all due care).

This brings us back to the abstract subject of social theory. If, as suggested above, Schlottmann's preoccupation with defending the subject can be seen as an instance of neo-liberal governmentality, this is not the same as saying it is possible to dispense entirely with such a subject. Just as SpaceTalk seems almost indispensable in social life and social science alike, it could be argued that some general conception of subjectivity continues to animate even the most deconstructive critical geography. What kind of subject do critical geographers construct when we deploy such concepts as *human rights*, *resistance* and *performativity*? Although such concepts do not simply reproduce the classic free subject of grand social theory, they do implicitly attribute a range of specific qualities to every human being: inherent value, embodied vulnerability to physical as well as psychological injury, culturally interpellated and relational identity, embodied expressiveness, ability to struggle against domination, embeddedness in specific socio-cultural and political-economic contexts, etc. Some of these qualities do differ clearly from those of the classic social-theoretical subject, but others differ only because of the new insistence on their context-specificity. In other words, as suggested above, the social construction – performativity couplet can be seen in important ways as an updated version of the structure – agency couplet. But if this is so, perhaps our setting aside or abandonment of the "older" issues was not after all an adequate response.

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