

Interactive comment on “Vom Containerraum zur entgrenzten Welt – Raumbilder als sozialwissenschaftliche Leitbilder” by W. Lutz

Anonymous Referee #2

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This is an excellent contribution to ongoing discussions of the role of spatial language in scholarly and everyday constructions of social reality. After an informative survey of aspects of metaphors in general, the author takes up two cases studies (the theories of Beck and Simmel) to illustrate the claim that spatial imagery is indispensable in social thought. The central point is that instead of trying to eradicate spatial metaphors, scholars should attempt to use them reflexively and thereby ‘enliven’ them rather than leaving them to play the role of unexamined and naturalized conventions.

The mode of argumentation by means of two extended excursi is very effective in that it allows Lutz to demonstrate the role of spatial metaphors with a high degree of subtlety. The price for this way of proceeding, however, is a lack of representativeness. The fact that both Beck and Simmel rely on spatial metaphors does not demonstrate

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that all social thought must rely on them. The argument can at best be suggestive, not definitive, in this regard. It is a persuasive claim, but more work will need to be done to show that it is in fact true (a careful look at Luhmann’s language would have been helpful, though perhaps the resulting paper would have been too long).

The two excursi also leave the impression of an almost Manichean contrast between the wise, reflexive Simmel and the blind, self-contradictory Beck. Even without an exhaustive knowledge of Beck’s writings, I suspect that he has been somewhat simplified in this paper. This is not a key problem, and it does seem to be the case that Beck had a major blind-spot with respect to his own reliance on spatial metaphors. But was he really that clueless? In any event, this part of the paper does point to the key role Lutz sees for reflexivity.

Since the 1980s, human geographers interested in social theory have often argued for more reflexivity in our thought and writing about socio-spatial phenomena. However, if, as Lutz argues, reliance on Raumbilder is inevitable, is it always necessary to devote (or better, divert) some energy and page space to an explicit reflection on how spatial imagery is shaping our work? To put it bluntly, sometimes we might have different priorities in what we write. Sometimes an explicit, reflexive treatment of the role of spatial language may not be the most important thing.

At issue, in other words, is a sort of micro-ethics of scholarly work, if we understand ethics to refer to decisions about how to prioritize and distribute our finite time, energy and thinking as embodied human beings. Social theory-oriented work tends to argue (as does Lutz here) in favor of reflexivity. By contrast, some scholars more strongly associated with cultural theory argue for partisan knowledges, that is, knowledges produced in an unavoidably and knowingly partial way, but which are not always presented as such. Another term for this approach is ‘strategic essentialism’. My point in bringing it up here is not so much to critique the current paper in particular; it is more to point out that this paper, like many others, makes implicit choices about the ethics of scholarly work, and that other choices are also possible.

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Again, this is an excellent paper. At most, a few additional sentences addressing these issues would be necessary before publication.

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