

Interactive comment on “Synthesizing the face-to-face experience: e-learning practices and the constitution of place online” by J. Maintz

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General comments

Julia Maintz' paper combines an empirical case study of an e-learning-course in the field of development cooperation (or better: capacity building) with the topologic concept of spatiality "fire space" provided by Law and Mol (2001). By using Actor-network theory (ANT) the author targets "the interrelation of face-to-face and online environments when they are enacted as social spaces" (34/1-2). The course with international participants consisted in an online-phase of six months and two workshops of about ten days at the beginning and the end of the course. Maintz conceptualized this course set-up as an "actor-network consisting of a group of human and non-human course members (virtual characters), time- and space-related conditions as well as the situation-specific influences relating to the course" (36/1-4).

Without any doubt the actual debate in human geography about the materiality of social processes gains from this contribution. Out of the four topologies offered by Law and Mol - region, network, fluid and fire - the "region" could be understood as the Euclidian spatiality of classical geographic thought, while "network" describes a special form of relational spatiality which some authors already regard as the new "dominant paradigm within human geography" (Murdoch 1998: 359). In my opinion the attempt to make the both other space metaphors ("fluids" and "fire") usable for geography and to highlight not only "immutable mobiles" but also "mutable mobiles" and "mutable immobiles" (Law and Mol 2001: 620) is a difficult but innovative and welcome venture. All in all I would judge this attempt to be successful and valuable. Nevertheless some problems of understanding the text remain, which I want to explain as follows.

Specific comments

It is not always clear what J. Maintz exactly means with "physical space" and "online space" as well as with "physical environment" and "online environment". This differentiation is crucial because in her argumentation the author wants to analyse the interrelations between these two spatialities, as mentioned above. At least the synonym usage of "physical environment" and "face-to-face environments" (37/10-11) seems to need further explanation, particularly since the "physical space" is regarded as "geometrical (Euclidean) space" (39/28) and she writes about "cultural and physical environments", too (39/28).

Furthermore, I am not sure which 'object' and its (shape) constancy should be observed. That refers in the same manner to the notion of presence and absence of the "fire space" in the chosen example. The citation of Law and Mol shows the understanding of this topology: "'in fire space a shape achieves constancy in a relation between presence and absence: the constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity' (Law and Mol, 2001a:615-616)" (43/16-17). But what is the "object" in the case study? Obviously it is the "place" itself, which is "constituted online", as the title of the paper suggests. In my opinion this place is a 'social place' that is

defined by the co-presence of the participants, only partially connected to physical locality and for the most part connected (or is even congruent) with "online workspace". But what is the simultaneous absence, of which the constancy of this place depends on? If I understood the argumentation well, both the joint face-to-face experiences (mobilised as memories) and third persons ("distant others") or narratives about the environment of singular participants count as 'absent objects'. It is not clear to me, whether this really deals with "absence" in the sense of Law's and Mol's fire space - in my reading that is hidden (!) conditions, which enable constancy of the observed object - and whether the corresponding objects could be mobilised in a network topology just as well. Finally I did not comprehend why Maintz sums up, that in her understanding "'place' was a mutable mobile defined by changing composition in its constitution in physical space versus online space" (48/14-16). According to the diction of Law and Mol (2001: 620) "mutable mobiles" correspond with the metaphor of "fluid space" while "mutable immobiles" correspond with "fire space".

Perhaps some of the understanding of these issues would be made easier with the help of hypothetic conclusions: How would a place be constituted online without any face-to-face contacts and/or with reduced possibilities to mobilise "distant others" in their "physical environment"? Or how would a place be constituted online, if face-to-face contacts would be simulated by video conferences? Could we speak about a fire space in these cases? How and why? Or: why not?

It would be interesting to read a little bit more about the used methods of the ethnographic fieldwork and the hypothesizing within the "theoretical coding". Which role did the observing participant play in the e-learning course? In what extent did she become part of the observed interactions herself?

Technical corrections

The formal quality of the paper is excellent. So far as I am able to judge as a non-native speaker, the language is fluent and precise without any mistakes. Regarding the

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citation there are almost no formal mistakes, apart from the following minor points: In the references a title of Huysman, Wenger and Wulf is listed (51/20), but it is mentioned nowhere in the text. I would prefer not to cite with a double naming of authors as J. Maintz did several times. Instead of "Thrift (Thrift 1999:314-315)" (48/25) I would prefer to write "Thrift (1999:314-315)"; so in the cases quoting Goffman on p. 39 (12-13) and Amin and Cohendet on p. 34 (23-24). The last one also is inconsequent in relation to the naming of the same source some sentences above. At the end of line 14 and the beginning of line 15 on p. 43 I would suggest not to put quotation marks because it is a continuous citation including the break.

References

Law, J. and Mol, A.: Situating technoscience: an inquiry into spatialities, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19, 609-621, 2001. Murdoch, J.: The spaces of actor-network theory, *Geoforum*, 29, 4, 357-374, 1998.

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