

*Social Geography Discussions* is the access reviewed discussion forum of *Social Geography*

# “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault<sup>1</sup> and M. Stock<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Lyon, Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Lyon, France

<sup>2</sup>Institut Universitaire Kurt Bösch, Sion, Switzerland

Received: 26 November 2008 – Accepted: 14 January 2009 – Published: 23 February 2009

Correspondence to: M. Stock (mathis.stock@iukb.ch)

Published by Copernicus Publications.

**SGD**

5, 1–23, 2009

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures

◀

▶

◀

▶

Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



## Abstract

This article intends to explore the conditions of possibility of a pragmatics of space. How practices are constituted through space, how the different ways of practising places are informed by different aspects of spatial dimensions? In order to get into this question, three points are developed. First, we will explicit the usefulness of the notion by proposing a shift from geographies of “being in space” towards geographies of “doing with space”. Second, we propose two concepts for a pragmatics of space: the notions of “coping with space” and space “at proof” are explored in order to be used as tools for investigation. Finally, the conditions and risks of using a pragmatist approach of space will be acknowledged. Especially, the treatment of a situation as webs of multiples relationships of humans, necessitating a multiple-layered approach, from the recollection of discourse, objects and observation is developed.

## 1 Introduction

As geographical theory tries to get an increasingly precise and subtle conception of the constitution of space and of the spatial conditions of society, the question of practice has found a stronger echo within geography (Thrift, 1983; Werlen, 1997; Lussault, 2000; Stock, 2004) and in the social sciences in general. Some have even referred to a “practice turn” (Knorr-Cetina and Schatzki, 2000). Different directions have been explored, from approaches taking the body and the performances of individuals seriously (Teather, 1999; Crouch, 2001) to others where practice is meant to go further than the traditional representation issue within what had been termed an “interpretive turn” in geography (Ley, 1987), alongside approaches to interaction based on ethno-methodological concepts and techniques (Laurier, 2003). In fact, a highly differentiated literature engages with the issue of the actor, on the one hand – seen as a means of capturing the constitution of space more precisely than structuralist approaches – and the different “figurations” (Elias), on the other hand, where individual and social

SGD

5, 1–23, 2009

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



dimensions are considered. As such, four approaches can be distinguished: axiological, action-theoretical, subjectivist and pragmatist<sup>1</sup>. These highly differentiated ways of tackling geography's cognitive problems can be embedded in several archaeologies of knowledge, which are not (yet) commensurable: cultures of spatial practice, geographical forms of knowledge that inform practice (Beaverstock, 2002), the performative nature of practice, place as constituted by practice (Pred, 1986), experience of space (Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1986) etc., not to mention behaviourist and psychological approaches to behaviour as related to the "environment" and to "settings".

Practice is approached through various theoretical programmes. This is a problem for a theory of spatially-informed practice, for the reference to "pragmatism" or "pragmatics" is not self-evident. Indeed, the term "practice" is used in several theoretical traditions and is not necessarily restricted to what is termed "pragmatism". Different traditions of pragmatism exist – we could at least distinguish Anglo-American style (dwelling on the philosophical traditions of Dewey, James, Pierce, Wittgenstein) from French style (dwelling on the sociological foundations of Schütz and Goffman) and German style (dwelling on a Marxian, Heideggerian and Schützian tradition) – which is problematic for scientific communication. "Pragmatics" is therefore a term used here more loosely in order to express a research area, in which practice is the focus, acknowledging the very different theoretical options that could be taken.

Although the last thirty years have seen progress in formulating the research questions – especially in the constitution of space by and through practice, one main question remains unresolved and highly controversial: how practices are constituted through space, or how the different ways of practising places are informed by different aspects of spatial dimensions. Indeed, this question implies that we acknowledge that no practice can be "a-spatial", that actors always "cope with space", nolens volens. In fact,

<sup>1</sup>Axiological approaches have been developed by Buttimer (1984), subjective approaches such as "humanistic" geography or phenomenology by Tuan (1970, 1974, 1977) and Relph (1976), Ley and Samuels (1980), action-theoretical approaches are put forward by Werlen (1993, 1995, 1997), pragmatist approaches come out with Thrift (1983) and Barnes (1989).

## **"Doing with space": towards a pragmatics of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



two questions have been raised. First, the question of constitution of space has gained importance, fuelled by Giddens' (1984) use of spatial elements in his model of the constitution of society<sup>2</sup>. The question of the relationship between agency and space has been brought into the focus of geographical investigation (Gregory, 1985). Second, the question of how space is mobilised helps us to understand that practice is neither purely social, as seen in traditional formulations on “social practice”, nor purely spatial, as seen in traditional formulations on “spatial practice”, and indeed it cannot be described as “socio-spatial” either. There is “just” practice, which has spatial dimensions coming with different styles of spatiality<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, those spatial dimensions are important, because they make a difference to how practice is performed<sup>4</sup>.

We would like to suggest here a specific way of engaging with these questions, called here “pragmatics of space”. In order to grasp this “doing with space” (*faire avec*), we propose to focus our attention on the different ways in which “space” is integrated by the (individual and collective) actors in situation, through a pragmatist approach. The acts of operators, with their instruments and technologies, are subsumed here under the concept of spatiality. It seems therefore important to focus on micro-situations – which does not mean that we only consider the scale of the present action, as is the case in sociological approaches to pragmatism – where the direct playing of operators with space can be observed. We can define “situation” as the relational convergence of actants, in which strategies, objects, instruments, values etc. are manifest<sup>5</sup>. In a situation,

<sup>2</sup>Dwelling on this model, Werlen (1997) and Löw (2001) developed further this constitution of space, whereas British geography developed criticism (see Gregory, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>The outstanding contribution of Hartke (1959) who made clear the importance of practice rather than space has been rediscovered by Werlen (1995) and used in order to propose geography as “science of situations” rather than as science of space (see Werlen, 1988, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>Several theoretical conceptions of how space is involved in actions or in practices. We can observe that they mostly put forward an *opposition* between space and humans – be it the dimension of society or the dimension of the individual, as if space was *separate* from society. See for example Thrift (1983) for different models of relationships between practice and space.

<sup>5</sup>“Actant” stems from the latourian “actor-network-theory”, originally composed by “actants”

the operators and particularly the human actors are “in proof” (à l’épreuve), particularly in relation to space, by mobilising their perceptive, cognitive, linguistic, technological and relational competences. Space is constituted during the action, not before or after the action. Space and action are co-constituted, and space is therefore with action.

5 This conception of space engaged in agency has therefore to grasp how arrangements, scales, distances – specific to a situation and justified and qualified by the actors as “co-constituents” of space – appear and disappear in processes. The question is therefore how to understand the manifold ways in which space is constituted as resource or condition in practices.

10 We cannot give a detailed account of this approach; rather, we will focus on three essential aspects: (1) the development of a perspective whereby “being in space” as the geographical horizon of investigation is replaced by the perspective of “doing with space”; (2) the exploration of the question of “proof” – the possibilities of success and failure – in doing with space; (3) the conditions for a pragmatist approach to space will  
15 be acknowledged.

## 2 Why a “pragmatics of space”?

Theories of practice focus on the actions as being performed, processually, by actors. From the point of view of space, it is an approach whereby action is seen as situated, embedded in a time-space frame or, as psychologists call it, a “setting”, and whereby  
20 actors make use of spatial elements such as distance, quality of place, limits, etc. There is therefore an important point to be made for geographies of practices: human beings cope with space. Their ways of being-in-the-world are characterized not by “being on Earth”, but by coping with space. One of our main arguments is that the question of “being-in-space” has been at the centre of investigation for at least the last one hundred years in geography: Vidal’s (1922) “genre de vie”, Dardel’s (1952), Tuan’s (1971,  
25 circulating and forming a “network”, as in semiotic theory. We shall use this word in order not to get in confusion with the “actor” as *human* operator (see Latour, 1991).

---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



1977), Relph's (1970, 1976) and Berque's (2000) phenomenological geography, the representation- and knowledge-based cultural geography, only challenged by "technological" arguments such as Gourou's (1973) or Bobek's (1959). Though, as Werlen (1995) argues, in a world where "traditional" societies are replaced by "late-modern" societies – especially characterized by relatively greater autonomous action based on reflexivity of individuals, it is theoretically consistent to focus on "geography-making" of people in their lifeworld. Therefore "doing with space" permits a more adequate approach of the spatial dimensions of events.

In order to demonstrate the usefulness, adequacy and specific perspective of the approach of practice and space, we will focus initially on the necessary shift from "being in space" towards "doing with space" as a fundamental difference and potential improvement in geographical research programmes. Then, we will acknowledge the progress made by different kinds of geographies of practice. They each have different ways of conceptualising practice and the link between practice and space.

## 2.1 From "being in space" towards "doing with space"

The relationship between human societies and space relies fundamentally on the basic idea of "being in space". This question can be tracked back to the philosophical treatment of humans as being in or within space (Plato, Heidegger). In his *Timaios*, Plato maintains that everything has to have a location in space, a *topos*; and so does every human being. Heidegger (1927, 1954) elaborates on his theory of spatiality by stating that "Dasein means being on Earth". He calls this being on Earth<sup>6</sup> "dwelling". Casey (1993) restates this problem by insisting on the need for philosophy to reconsider the question of place, instead of that of space. Entrikin (1991) uses this entry of the necessary being in a place to argue in favour of the quality of 'betweenness' of place, between the natural and the symbolic.

<sup>6</sup>This is not the only definition given: Heidegger (1952) also defines dwelling as "relationship to places through space".

## "Doing with space": towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



Focusing on the aspect of practice as “doing”, we argue that it would be more appropriate to develop the perspective towards what “humans do with space” rather than “being in space”. Three arguments can briefly be developed<sup>7</sup> here. First, the expression “within” space or “in” space suggests that there is a pre-existent spatial volume or res extensa, a conception of space as container or as a substance. As could be shown (Lévy, 1994; Werlen, 1995), this conception is misleading if one considers the power of action. Moreover, it means that space is conceived as separate from the practices of individuals, even as an opposition between society and space as two “blocks”, whereas it has become an interesting idea to consider space as a dimension (Lévy, 1994) or a condition (Werlen, 1995) of action. The traditional way of conceiving practice/space also conveys the idea that space is conceived as “already-there” (“déjà-là”) as Lefebvre (1974) puts it, and that practice moulds itself into it. The more differentiated approach to space as a result of practice, through processes of qualification, arrangement, building, conception and bodily gestures, is absent. Finally, in geography and philosophy, but also in sociology, the question of dwelling has been considered as “being-in-space”. Conceptualising “dwelling” as practice with space suggests a more active meaning, a process or an activity rather than a passive and static relationship to space, raised for example in the question of geographical referents of identity, values of landscape etc. It could therefore fuel research in those research areas in which questions of practice have been underscored.

Yet, how should “space” be defined here? For at least a century, this question has been a difficult one for geography. Fortunately, efforts and progress have been made since to define the concept of space for approaches to human societies. In particular, the outstanding contribution within geography made by Werlen (1995, 1997), who tests the adequacy of conceptions of space against the main geographical theories of the 20th century, has to be acknowledged. From space as a substance, there has been a move towards the definition of space as Leibnizian, as “relations” (Harvey, 1972; Lévy,

---

<sup>7</sup>This thesis would call for a more thorough demonstration than possible here and would go beyond the limits of the article. A short appreciation must suffice.

1994), as a process of ‘synthesis’ and ‘spacing’ (Löw, 2001) and as a ‘shortcut’ for relations to the physical world (Werlen, 1995). Building on those achievements, we use the term “space” here to designate neither an “object” existing independently of other objects (Descartes), nor distance-relations of objects (Leibniz), nor conditions of possibility of knowledge (Kant). We reach our definition of space in four movements. Primo, following Elias (1996), “space” is a concept of a high degree of synthesis that encompasses many others and enables us to synthesize the question of distance, quality of place, landscape, location, orientation, accessibility, placing, displacing, enveloping, location, place, territory and so on. Secundo, 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. Tertio, Derrida’s (1993:32) idea of “khôra” being indeterminate – “there is khôra, but the khôra does not exist”<sup>8</sup> – allows for a transposition to the concept of space: “space” is indeterminate<sup>9</sup>. Quarto, space, for human societies, takes a specific quality: it is inhabited, that is co-constituted by practice, and not only a question of an arrangement of “things”, albeit “earthly things”. “Doing with space” means therefore to get in proof with distance, territory, place, landscape, environment, technologies of space, placing and displacement,

<sup>8</sup>“le référent de cette référence n’existe pas. Il n’a pas les caractères d’un étant recevable dans l’ontologique, à savoir d’un étant intelligible ou sensible. Il y a khôra mais le khôra n’existe pas” (Derrida, 1993:32).

<sup>9</sup>Derrida (1993) states: “L’article défini présuppose l’existence d’une chose, l’étant *khôra* auquel, à travers un nom commun, il serait facile de se référer. Or ce qui est dit de *khôra*, c’est que ce nom ne désigne aucun des types d’étant connus, reconnus ou, si l’on préfère encore, *reçus* par le discours philosophique, c’est-à-dire par le logos ontologique qui fait la loi dans le *Timée* : *khôra* n’est ni sensible ni intelligible. Il y a khôra, on peut même s’interroger sur sa physis et sa dynamis, au moins s’interroger provisoirement à leur égard, mais ce qu’il y a là n’est pas; et nous reviendrons plus loin sur ce que peut donner à penser cet il y a qui d’ailleurs ne donne rien en donnant lieu ou en donnant à penser, en quoi il sera risqué d’y voir l’équivalent d’un es gibt, de ce es gibt qui reste sans doute impliqué dans toute théologie négative à moins qu’il ne l’appelle toujours, en son histoire chrétienne” (p. 30).

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



images, spatiality etc.<sup>10</sup>. All these elements constitute “problems” to be solved, “tests” to be passed, “proofs” of competence in the process of practice.

Beyond the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, the question of “coping with space” acknowledges linkages to different theoretical domains<sup>11</sup>. First, Michel de Certeau’s (1980) “arts de faire” (“arts of doing”) was able to observe highly differentiated ways of performing practices. By establishing the problem of space as the focus of analysis, it allowed for an understanding of the highly differentiated ways of coping with space. Certeau was working with the hypothesis that practices were of a “tactical” nature. De Certeau (1990) tries to push forward a theory of practice of the lived space<sup>12</sup> and was interested in “ways of doing” (manières de faire). Second, Michel Foucault’s (2001) approach to human societies is fundamentally informed by spatial metaphors and concepts. He always sees the social as spatial ordering in order to perform discipline, surveillance, clinic, etc. He elaborates the thesis of the necessary use of space in order to get things done. His analysis of the army and the hospital as policed sociality fundamentally mobilises categories of space. Furthermore, his archaeological approach is useful in order to describe the conditions of possibility of situated practice. Third, Schütz’s (1932) phenomenologically informed action theory proposes the notions “Mitwelt” (world of contemporaries), “Umwelt” (world of fellows in direct experience), “Vorwelt” (world of predecessors), “Nachwelt” (world of successors) in order to understand the multiplicity of relationships present in action, and not only the bodily co-

<sup>10</sup>It might not be a satisfactory definition of space because of its enumerating character. Nevertheless, it is more helpful than conceptions opposing space and place, or space and society. See for recent discussions on the concept of space within geography: Harvey (1972), Schatzki (1991), Werlen (1993, 1995), Lévy (1994), Cox (1995), Graham (1998).

<sup>11</sup>It is by no means an exhaustive one: the contribution to the concept of “problematic situation” by Popper (1976) and Bourdieu’s (1972) “practical logic”, and the growing body of situational analysis (see for example Barwise, 1983).

<sup>12</sup>“*appropriation* du système topographique par le piéton”, “une *réalisation* spatiale du lieu” et “des *relations* entre positions différenciées” (p. 148).

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



presence of the actors. Fourth, the approaches based on “situated action” – initiated among others by Thomas (1927), Popper (1955) and Goffman (1964, 1963) – allow for a spatial context on the micro-level where face-to-face interaction occurs, although criticism has been raised on the way in which space has been conceptualised<sup>13</sup>.

To sum up, if developed fully, pragmatics of space could be an area of investigation theoretically informed by the different approaches such as a phenomenologically-based practice approach, where the situated action, the conditions of possibility and the creative “tactics” and “involvement regimes” are mobilised in order to understand the highly differentiated ways of mobilising space as problem or as empowerment. The specific question of space as proof or as “probe” could be a new perspective.

## 2.2 Approaches to practice in geography

Within geography, there has been an important development of the question of practice since at least the 1980s. Several contributions engage with the question of the spatial dimensions of practice, and the various ways in which space is constituted through practice. It is in fact a very broad and varied field of interest with many different theoretical options: some build on an action-theoretical framework (Gregory, 1985; Pred, 1986; Werlen, 1993, 1995, 1997; Racine and Raffestin, 1983; Raffestin, 1986), some on an hermeneutical framework (Ley, 1987), some on the Bourdieusian theory of practice, focusing on the non-representational dimension of practice (Thrift, 1983, 1996; Dewsbury, 2000; Crouch, 2003). We will focus here on three kinds of approaches: practice as action, as performativity and as ethno-methodology, assuming therefore the central concept of practice.

Practice as action has mainly been developed by Benno Werlen (1993, 1997), who translates and develops Giddens’ structuration theory into a more spatially-aware theory. The focus is on the ways in which people “do” their geographies in day-to-day

<sup>13</sup>Especially the fact the scale taken into account is only that of the micro-situation, without acknowledging absent features constitutes a serious limit of those approaches.

### “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



life, developing three different spatially relevant “regimes”, which stem from the three modalities of action theories (Pareto’s instrumental rationality, Weber and rational choice theory, norm-oriented theories with Parsons and communication-oriented theories with Schütz). There are therefore three different modalities of space co-constituent of practice: the rational regime, where Euclidean space is relevant; norm-oriented regime, where exclusion/inclusion logic is relevant and space takes the character of territory and boundary; and a symbol-oriented regime, where emblematic places convey identities. It is a proposition to radically embed the research object of geography not on “space”, but on “society” in the spatial dimensions of agency. Therefore, the question of the “practice of worlding” – Praxis der Weltbindung – is seen as the essential problem developed for geography. This coherent proposition raises two questions: can we discriminate models of more or less involvement with the world? That would mean that praxis der Weltbindung designates not only day-to-day life defined by routines, but also different regimes of “involvement and detachment” (Elias, 1987), including tourism for example. Second, are there other meanings of space besides the rational, norm and symbol-oriented regimes? This would point to the question of the ways in which individuals develop competences in order to solve problems of space: can they be reduced to those three regimes? For example, five spatially-informed skills – symbolized by geographers in their scientific practice – can be observed: metrics that regulate the near/faraway; placing that differentiates the here/there; scaling that regulates the small/big; regionalisation that distinguishes different areas; and delimitation that designates the open/close relationship (Lussault, 2007). How might they relate to the three Werlen regimes of space? And how might this relate to cognitive, corporeal and instrumental skills when engaging with space?

Secondly, British geographers have engaged with the approach of “performativity” of practice, the main characteristic of which is the question of bodily engagement with space<sup>14</sup>. The following theses are defended: practice is to be understood as expressive, as embodied, as encounters with space, where the emotive and affect are

<sup>14</sup>See for example Crouch (2003), Latham (2003), Thrift (2002, 2003, 2004).

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



important, and not only as guided by rules, representations, values and social roles. Engaging with the performative dimensions of practice helps to understand “the unexpected, the different, the risky” (Crouch, 2003:121). If we can generally agree with the importance given to the bodily and fleshy in the performance of practice – an argument that can be tracked back to the phenomenological approaches of Husserl, Heidegger, Schütz, Merleau-Ponty – there are three aspects that might prevent us from using it without precaution. First, it is a certain kind of approach to practice focusing on the performative dimension that leaves other kinds of approaches to practice in the dark. Like sociological approaches to situated action, there is a risk of considering space and bodily engagement only at a small spatial scale, and failing to relate them to events going on beyond the concrete sphere of action. Furthermore, one might ask what happened to the psychoanalytical dimensions of bodily engagement, such as touch and the skin, creating and using a “transitional space” (Volvey, 2004). More thorough research is needed in order to make those linkages clear<sup>15</sup>.

Another type of approach can also be identified, that of the practical engagement with spatial elements, such as the work of Laurier (1999, 2003) on conversational practice, drawing on Schegloff’s (1973) innovative, indeed seminal, contribution<sup>16</sup>. The theoretical background is that of ethno-methodology, developed by Garfinkel, Sacks and Goffman, but relying heavily – once more – on the work of Alfred Schütz. The ethno-methodological approach to space is based on the argument of a severe limitation of hermeneutical approaches to practice: there is no “sense” to be “revealed” in space,

<sup>15</sup>It is interesting to note that this kind of theory of practice is developing without any reference to similar or different theories of practice outside the UK, and we can ask how does this come. Is it a movement that allows to go “back to the roots” of empiricism, relatively stronger than in German or French research tradition? Is it a lack of acknowledgement of other theories of practice, grounded in a “practical” problem, that of language?

<sup>16</sup>See Mondada (2001) for a thorough analysis of the discourse on cities, the work of Laurier (1999, 2003) on different aspects of conversation, and the special issue of Environment and Planning 2003 with a guest editorial by Eric Laurier.

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



there is “accountability” of practice. Therefore, the focus of research concerns the ‘methods’ by which actors place their practices. As Mondada (1998) points out, practices are (1) reflexive, because of the accountability of the action, (2) indexical, because they point to the context of action, and (3) ad hoc, since they have no other aim besides practice. One of the main concerns, as Laurier (2002) explains, is the “reduction” of concrete events of the lifeworld by scientific discourse, thus turning to theories that take this concreteness into account. While this point can be acknowledged, it is nevertheless questionable what status should be assigned epistemologically to all these scientific discourses. Should we call them “explanation”, “description”, “concept”, “law”, “rule” or “pattern”? This is a fundamental question, which does not elude the question of concreteness, but which tries not to follow blindly the question of reductionism.

### 3 “Doing with space” – space as “proof”

#### 3.1 Of words and things: “faire avec de l’espace”

Our first problem is about finding the right expression. How should we call the fact that space constitutes a “problem” to solve for practice? Traditional expressions, we would like to suggest, fail to address the problem adequately: “spatial practice” is typically an expression that leads one to think of practices as only spatial. Yet, the spatial dimension or the spatiality of practice seems “better” addressed by focusing on the differentiated ways in which practice is related to space. Individuals do something, and they do it with space, i.e. by mobilising space as a problem and resource. Nevertheless, labelling it “spatial” practice may be misleading because of the potential exclusion of other dimensions, and of the often “non-intentional” character of the constitution of space (Hartke, 1959; Werlen, 1997), neglected in classical geographies of practice. It is therefore important to take the spatial dimension of practice as a decisive, but not an exclusive, element.

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



We found the French expression “faire avec” useful in order to describe the ways in which the spatial dimensions of human societies are “active”, “integrated” and “co-constituent” in practice. It means that nolens volens people engage with space: the French expression “il faut faire avec” means that one has to do something although it might not be very pleasant, desirable or even aimed for. One has to cope with it and integrate data into the action; one cannot either push it away or change it. Several solutions might be possible in order to express this in English. For instance, the expression “coping with space” might help to translate one of the meanings. “Coping with” means to “deal effectively with something difficult” (Oxford Dictionary). We also find the expression “coping” or “coping mechanism” in psychology, designating a struggle with the emotions due to a negative encounter. It could also be related to the “Realitätsprinzip” in Freudian psychoanalysis. An alternative expression could be the following: “dealing with space”, “doing with space”, “making with space”, “practising space”, or “experimenting (with) space”. Discussion of the “best” word is not closed, for arguments in support of a different option may arise. One solution might also be to choose “doing with space” as a general expression, which would be differentiated into “coping” when space is a problem, and “playing” when space is the object of playful practice.

### 3.2 Practice as “proof” and “experience” within situations

The question of space as a problem can be linked to the pragmatic tradition of James Dewey and his notion of experiment, but finds a specific translation through the notion of “épreuve”. In French sociology, the expression “épreuve” has been developed in order to gain insight into the practical relationship to the world. Again, the question arises of how to find an English expression for this. It has been translated into English by “test” (Thévenot, 2001), although different expressions might be possible. The Oxford Dictionary shows the following translations of “épreuve”: proof, test, examination, event, trial, but also piece of evidence. Yet, we find a very interesting meaning of “proof” in the Oxford Dictionary: “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”, a proverb in-

dicating that “the real value of something can be judged only from practical experience or results”. The notion of “at proof” might help to describe ways of doing with space. “Testing space”, “experimenting space”, “proofing space”, “probing space” might also be possible expressions. We shall use here the expression “proof” because it may be used in a wider sense than “test”. This comes quite close to the French meaning of “épreuve” as it is used in pragmatist theory.

The sociological notion “épreuve” was invented by the French sociologist Chateauraynaud (1991) in order to express the encounter with difficulties in everyday life that individuals have to cope with. It was developed and elaborated more thoroughly by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), Thévenot (2000, 2001) and Boltanski and Chiapello (1999). It is a key concept designed to overcome deterministic theories of the social, be they exterior structures or embodied norms. It focuses on the processual aspect of an action, where resistance and problems may occur. “L’épreuve est toujours une épreuve de force c’est-à-dire l’événement au cours duquel des êtres, en se mesurant (imaginez un bras de fer entre deux personnes ou l’affrontement entre un pêcheur et la truite qui cherche à lui échapper) révèlent ce dont ils sont capables et même, plus profondément, ce dont ils sont faits” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999:73–74)<sup>17</sup>. It helps to underline the uncertainty of social situations, as a result of which expectations may not be met. This importance assigned to the power relations between individuals constitutes the specificity of this approach, relatively absent in Anglo-American theoretical tradition. They draw a distinction between two kinds of proof – “épreuve de force”, revealing the degree of power, and “épreuve légitime”, revealing the “dimension” of the persons involved – elaborated as two poles of a continuum of different situations. It is differentiated “selon le degré de légitimité, de réflexivité ou de stabilité relatives des

<sup>17</sup>“The proof is always a showdown, an event during which human beings, while measuring themselves (imagine an arm wrestling between two persons or the confrontation between a fisherman and a trout) reveal what they are capable of, and even, more profoundly, what they are made of” (translated by the authors).

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



êtres engagés” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999:406)<sup>18</sup>.

An interesting point can be made here: the concept of “proof” enables us to change the scale of the different situations studied. It is therefore a different semantic field to that of Dewey’s “experiment”, which translates more the idea of trying new things out, not to be confronted with a difficulty while practicing, nor the claiming of a proof.

These tests and experiments of practice are problematic within a situation. The proving situation can be defined as a circumstantial convergence of social actors in interaction<sup>19</sup>. Geographically expressed, it is also interaction with space, for the relationship to space in the form of distance, placing or the visual sphere (landscape) “circulates” between actors through practice. The network of actants (Latour, 1991) is constituted not only by social contents, but also by spatial contents. The skills (ability, competence, know-how) to be able to deal with the situation are mobilised. We can think of three kinds of skills of coping with space: cognitive skills – such as knowledge of locations (the “best” ski slope is found in Chamonix), or distances (the shortest way to go from London to Paris, or the most scenic route. . . ), behavioural skills – such as differentiated civility in public space and private space, on the underground or the plane, in a palace hotel or a club hotel, and instrumental skills – such as knowing how to use the ticket vending machine, to drive a car, to find an apartment, to book a package tour on the Internet, etc. Such skills are socially acquired – through socialisation in different places: home, school, football club, dance school, university etc. – but kept up to date by “doing”, and, as such, constantly updated in those situations. This might also provide us with the solution to one of the great enigmas of the constitution of society: social and spatial structures do not exist, only stabilized, and culturally and socially recognized,

<sup>18</sup>“alongside the degree of relative legitimacy, reflexivity or stability of the involved human beings” (transl. by the authors)

<sup>19</sup>See Dewey (1938) and Goffman (1964) for the approach of the situation, although from different theoretical stances, and Fornel and Quéré (1999) for a recent development in French sociology

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



situations, within which actors constantly update their practices and competences<sup>20</sup>.

To sum up, all acts are “proofs”, but there are emblematic situations, where the “event” is more significant than in mundane situations.

#### 4 Conditions of possibility of pragmatics of space

5 Pragmatics of space is conceived here as a theoretical tool designed as an approach to situations rather than an approach to space<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, it helps one to understand that “spatial logics” vary with different situations, rather than being one-dimensional. It aims at developing more differentiated thought on how space is co-constituent of society. Yet, the use of pragmatist approaches is not self-evident. It raises a number of questions of adequacy with the object. Are practice and situation described in a congruent manner? Several problems can be discussed. First, the risk of treating the situation as situation of hic et nunc, thus neglecting the “elsewhere” and the “anteriority”, both socially and biographically. Indeed, individuals and societies are always with “other” spaces, connected to them by tools – more and more by handheld telecommunication devices – or by the imagination – projection to the place one is about to go to next or places lived in by those one thinks of, fantasies about places, etc. Hence, approaching the situation as a container that contains practices seems inappropriate. The conditions of possibility and archaeology of the situation are important in this respect. This relational perspective seems crucial to the adequate analysis of practice, as for example put forward by Schütz (1932) in order to understand the multiplicity of relationships present in action<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>If competences are not reactualised, they can get lost: learning a foreign language and not practising it, not knowing any longer how to

<sup>21</sup>See Werlen (1988, 1993) for the plea of geography as science of situations, rather than “science of space”.

<sup>22</sup>The pragmatist approach can be seen as a relational approach, such as Schütz (1932), Bourdieu (1980), Elias (1987), Foucault (1984) proposed to do. It is less a new “relational

### “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



Second, there is no “one best method” of methodological access to practice. The conditions of possibility of the situation, the observation of the current situation and the reflexive “retour sur l’action qui convient” as ex post analysis, need to be considered. These elements require different techniques: observation, biographical interview, archaeology of situations that analyze language, gestures and instruments. An analysis of gestures and instruments allows for observation of the various ways in which “co-spatiality” is fabricated synchronically and diachronically. Through “transitional instruments”, such as the MP3 player, cell phone, credit card, rucksack, notebook, car, book, dog, umbrella, hat etc., individuals are accompanied by instruments from one situation to another. It is also through some such instruments that the individual interconnects with other individuals and places. The analysis of language allows us to grasp judgements of situations and practices. Ideas, discourse and judgements as speech acts refer to spatial configurations and predicate space (Mondada, 2000), mobilised in certain situations: Switzerland or Tahiti as “paradise”, Paris as “romantic city”, California as “healthy place”, Iraq as “rogue” place, mountains as “beautiful”, the banlieue as “ugly”, etc. The archaeology of situations allows for an understanding of how meaning is produced in a specific situation and how competences have been acquired. The analysis focuses on the processes of learning – for example a tourist being able to encounter alterity or not, knowledge of the housing market, on technology – development of transport, ATM, money, societal conditions – the development of democratic, relatively more individualized and differentiated societies, with greater legal security – etc.

geography” – because geography has always been using relational elements: see Vidal and his notion of “complex”, Claval (1973) his notion of region as relational, Harvey’s (1972) relational space, Relph’s (1976) and Tuan’s (1977) relationships to space as assigning meaning to a place – than the implementation of relational approaches within a discipline and for a certain purpose. It permits indeed not to overstate or to exaggerate the *hic et nunc*, the practice as being performed in one place and at one moment. It permits also to observe with more detachment the growing “hype” of “relational geographies” (Bingham, 1996; Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Thrift, 2004).

---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



Third, how is space essential in a situation? Is it a static or rather a dynamic element? Situational events can be seen as “fait spatial total”<sup>23</sup>. They constitute an assemblage of various realities: human and non-human operators, speech acts, matter, form, arrangement and image. It could be understood through a theory of spatiality within which the concept of arrangement constitutes the essential element. From a material frame pre-existent to the situation, the process of a situation institutes a spatial arrangement congruent with the practice. It is a spatialised, circumstantial and labile collection of objects, things, persons, ideas and language that an actor configures within a situation. Therefore, space is fundamentally modified by processed events. It changes continuously: after the practice, it constitutes a new quality of space although it is not completely different until its re-activation and incorporation into a new activity. The material form pre-existent to the practice – the “geography” of antecedent acts mingling configurations such as bio-physical milieu, objects, architectural artefacts etc. – constitutes a resource for practice. It is used specifically by the actors and incorporated into the arrangement they create. It constitutes more or less a potential to the practice, which pre-exists and is configured in a certain way by the actors. Focusing on those ephemeral configurations using pre-configured elements allows for the acknowledgement of a comparative advantage of pragmatics of space over traditional pragmatist approaches, for the spatial form exists before, during and after practice has configured it specifically.

How could pragmatics of space contribute to the growing body of theory in geography? Is it an incommensurable contribution or might it be useful in tackling the “big” questions in geography? We would argue that pragmatics of space might help to obtain a more thorough insight into the key questions of contemporary geography – be it the society/nature nexus, the globalization/localization tension, individualization and the constitution of community, the identity/alterity tension or the growing differentiation of society, not to mention neglected issues such as love, death, solitude - by developing a more differentiated *theoreia* – the Greek’s “perspective”, because they all rely

<sup>23</sup>This expression is inspired by Marcel Mauss’ “*fait social total*”.

on acts implying space. It might also fuel attempts to overcome the epistemologically constructed oppositions such as place/space, society/space, quantitative/qualitative in order to grasp them as simply different ways of producing knowledge. It continues the dialogue with other social sciences. It could even be a specific geographical contribution to the question of practice, widely discussed in social sciences: space as resource and condition of practice, mobilised in situations through “proofs”. Or, as Werlen (1997) called it: “Praxis der Weltbindung”. This beautiful expression might enable us to investigate how people are related practically to the world, in different situations, by mobilising space.

## References

- Berque A.: *Ecumène, Introduction à l'étude des milieux humains*, Paris, Belin, 2000.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello E.: *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.
- Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L.: *De la justification, Les économies de la grandeur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.
- Boltanski, L. and Thévenot. L.: *The Reality of Moral Expectations, A Sociology of Situated Judgement, Philosophical Explorations*, 3(3), 208–231, 2001.
- Bourdieu, P.: *Raisons pratiques, Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris, Seuil, 1994.
- Bourdieu, P.: *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Paris, Seuil, 2000 (1972).
- Casey, E.: *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Certeau, M. de: *L'invention du quotidien 1, Arts de faire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.
- Chateauraynaud, F.: *La faute professionnelle, Une sociologie des conflits de responsabilité*, Paris, Métailié, 1991.
- Claval, P.: *Principes de Géographie sociale*, Paris, LITEC, 1973.
- Cox, K. R.: *Concepts of Space, Understanding In Human Geography, and Spatial Analysis, Urban Geography*, 16(4), 304–326, 1995.
- Crouch, D.: *Spatialities and the feeling of doing, Social and Cultural Geography*, 2(1), 61–75, 2001.
- Crouch, D.: *Spacing, Performing, And Becoming: Tangles in the Mundane, Environment and Planning, A35(11), 1945–1960*, 2003.

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



- Dardel, E.: L'homme et la Terre. Nature de la réalité géographique, Paris, CTHS, 1990 (1952).  
Derrida, J.: Khôra, Paris, Galilée, 1993.  
Dewey, J.: The Public and Its Problems, New York, Holt, 1927.  
Dewey, J.: Logic, The Theory of Inquiry, New York, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1938.
- 5 Dewsbury, J.: 'Performativity and the event: enacting a philosophy of difference', Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 18(4), 473–496, 2000.  
Elias, N.: Die Gesellschaft der Individuen, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1987.  
Elias, N.: Symbol Theory, London, Sage, 1991.  
Elias, N.: Über die Zeit, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1984.
- 10 Enrikin, J. N.: The Betweenness of Place, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.  
Fornel, M. de and Quéré, L.: La logique des situations. Nouveaux regards sur l'écologie des activités sociales, Paris, EHESS, 1999.  
Foucault, M.: Dits et écrits, Paris, Gallimard, 2001.  
Giddens, A.: The Constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuration, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984.
- 15 Goffman, E.: The Neglected Situation, American Anthropologist, 66(6), 133–136, 1964.  
Goffman, E.: Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings, Glencoe, Free Press, 1963.  
Graham, S.: The end of geography or the explosion of place? Conceptualizing space, place and information technology, Progress In Human Geography, 22(2), 165–185, 1998.
- 20 Harvey, D.: Social Justice and the City, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.  
Hartke, W.: Gedanken über die Bestimmung von Räumen gleichen sozialgeographischen Verhaltens, Erdkunde, 13(4), 426–436, 1959.  
Heidegger, M.: Bauen, Wohnen, Denken, in: Vorträge und Aufsätze, edited by: Heidegger, M., Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 139–156, 2004 (1952).
- 25 Heidegger, M.: Sein und Zeit, Tübingen, Klostermann, 1999 (1927).  
Knorr-Cetina, K. and Schatzki, T. (Eds.): The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory, London, Routledge, 2000.  
Latour, B.: La clef de Berlin, Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences, Paris, Seuil, 1991.
- 30 Laurier, E.: Why people say where they are during mobile phone calls, Environment and Planning D, Society & Space, 19(4), 485–504, 2001.  
Laurier, E. and Philo, Ch.: The region in the boot: Mobilising lone subjects and multiple objects, Environment and Planning D, Society & Space, 21(1), 85–106, 2003.

---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



- Lefebvre, H.: La production de l'espace, Paris, Economica, 1999 (1974).
- Lévy, J.: L'espace légitime, Sur la dimension géographique de la fonction politique, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1994.
- Lévy, J.: Capital spatial, in: Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés, edited by: Lévy, J. and Lussault, M., Paris, Belin, 2003.
- Ley, D.: Cultural/Humanistic Geography, Progress In Human Geography, 9(4), 415–423, 1985.
- Ley, D. and Samuels, M. (Eds): Humanistic Geography, Prospects and Problems, London, Croom Helm, 1980.
- Löw, M.: Raumsoziologie, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2001.
- Lussault, M.: Action(s)! Une petite théorie de l'action spatiale, in: Logiques de l'espace, esprit des lieux, edited by: Lévy, J. and Lussault, M., Géographies à Cerisy, Paris, Belin, 11–36, 2000.
- Lussault, M.: L'homme spatial, La construction sociale de l'espace humain, Paris, Seuil, 2007.
- Mondada, L.: De l'analyse des représentations à l'analyse des activités descriptives en contexte, Cahiers de Praxématique, 31, 127–148, 1998.
- Mondada, L.: Décrire la ville, Paris, Anthropos, 2000.
- Plato, Timaios, Kritias, Minos, Nomoi: Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1994.
- Popper, K.: Objective Knowledge, Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Pred, A.: Place, Practice and Structure, Social and Spatial Transformation in Southern Sweden: 1750–1850, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986.
- Racine, J.-B. and Raffestin, C.: L'espace et la société dans la géographie sociale francophone: pour une approche critique du quotidien, in: Espace et localisation, La redécouverte de l'espace dans la pensée scientifique de langue française, edited by: Paelinck, J. H. P. and Sallez, A., Paris, Economica, 304–329, 1983.
- Raffestin, C.: Territorialité: Concept ou Paradigme de la géographie sociale?, Geographica Helvetica, 41(2), 91–95, 1986.
- Relph, E.: Place and Placelessness, London, Pion, 1976.
- Relph, E.: An Inquiry onto the Relations between Phenomenology and Geography, Canadian Geographer, 14(3), 193–201, 1971.
- Schatzki, T. R.: Spatial Ontology and Explanation, Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 81(4), 650–670, 1991.
- Schegloff, E.: Notes on a Conversational Practice: Formulating Place, in: Studies in Social Interaction, edited by: Sudnow, D., New York, Free Press, 75–119, 1973.

---

**“Doing with space”:  
towards a pragmatics  
of space**

M. Lussault and M. Stock

---

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion



- Schütz, A.: Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1973 (1932).
- Seamon, D. and Mugerauer, R.: Dwelling, Place and Environment, Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1989.
- Stock, M.: L'habiter comme pratique des lieux, Espacestems.net, Textuel, 18.12.04 ([www.espacestems.net/documents1138.html](http://www.espacestems.net/documents1138.html)), 2004.
- Teather, E. K. (Ed.): Embodied Geographies, London, Routledge, 1999.
- Thévenot, L.: Pragmatic regimes governing the engagement with the world, in: The practice turn in contemporary theory, edited by: Knorr-Cetina, K. and Schatzki, T., London, Routledge, 2000.
- Thomas W. I.: Situational Analysis: The Behavior Pattern and the Situation, Publications of the American Sociological Society, 22, 1–13, 1927.
- Thrift, N.: On the social determination of action in space and time, Environment and Planning D, Society and Space, 1(1), 23–56, 1983.
- Thrift, N.: Spatial Formations, London, Sage, 1996.
- Thrift, N.: Intensities of feeling: Towards a spatial politics of affect, Geografiska Annaler, 86B(1), 57–78, 2004.
- Tuan, Y.-F.: Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience, London, Arnold, 1977.
- Tuan, Y.-F.: Geography, Phenomenology and the Study of Human Nature, Canadian Geographer, 14(2), 193–201, 1971.
- Vidal de la Blache, P.: Principes de géographie humaine, Paris, Utz, 1995 (1922).
- Werlen, B.: Von der Raum- zur Situationswissenschaft, Geographische Zeitschrift, 76(4), 193–208, 1988.
- Werlen, B.: Die Situationsanalyse, Ein unbeachteter Vorschlag von K. R. Popper und seine Bedeutung für die geographische Regionalforschung, Conceptus, Zeitschrift für Philosophie, 23(1), 49–65, 1989.
- Werlen, B.: Society, Action, Space, An Alternative Human Geography, London, Routledge, 1993.
- Werlen, B.: Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierung, Vol. 1, Zur Ontologie von Gesellschaft und Raum, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1995.
- Werlen, B.: Sozialgeographie alltäglicher Regionalisierung, Vol. 2, Globalisierung, Region und Regionalisierung. Stuttgart, Steiner, 1997.

## “Doing with space”: towards a pragmatics of space

M. Lussault and M. Stock

Title Page

Abstract

Introduction

Conclusions

References

Tables

Figures



Back

Close

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

