

Interactive comment on “‘Doing with space’: towards a pragmatics of space” by M. Lussault and M. Stock

W.-D. Sahr, Curitiba, Brazil (Referee)

wolf-dietrich.sahr@urz.uni-heidelberg.de

Contextualizing

In recent years, the discussion on the role of action and practice in space has become a prime theme in geographical epistemology. Originally, it aroused from phenomenological and humanistic approaches which focus on the individuality of geography-making (Hartke, Dardel, Lowenthal, Buttner, Tuan), including a psychological side-branch into the geographies of perception (Lowenthal, Gould and others). Since the 1980s, such approaches have shifted towards action- and practice-oriented theory, mainly among German-speaking and Anglophone geographers (Werlen, Weichhart, Gregory, Pile). French geography has rarely accompanied these developments due to its more structural, relational and/or critical approaches. Now, it seems, it is the turn of French geography to make its contribution on the subject, especially since the innovative discussion on Territory, Social Space and Social Spatiality (Di MEO 1998, LEVY 1999, 49-96, Di MEO 2007, LUSSAULT 2007, among others). Therefore, the article is a very welcome French contribution to the “performative turn”, even though most of its references are still indebted to German or Anglophone geographers, philosophers and sociologists.

The paper “Doing with space: towards a pragmatics of space” adds a new dimension to the discussion on action and space. It uses the linguistic play between *faire avec de l’espace* and *l’espace en épreuve* focusing on a differential approach on perceptions/comprehensions of space (13:12-17:3). It exposes the epistemological contrast between materialist-utilitarian approaches “on/with space” on one hand and conflictive approaches that highlight the “use of space” in spatial conflicts on the other. Both attitudes are denominated “pragmatics of space”. Before exploring these “pragmatics of space”, the authors point to two philosophical currents involved: existentialism (*being in space*) and pragmatism (*doing with space*) (5:17-13:11) allegedly giving preference to the second one. The text is still rounded up with a relatively lengthy introduction into the concepts of practice/action (2:14-5:15) and an inconclusive conclusion on the implications of “pragmatics of space” (17:4-20:9).

To me, the authors are joining the “performative turn” in an innovative way opening promising horizons, especially when it comes to the contrast of an existentialist-phenomenological and a pragmatist perspective (chapter 2.1), a discussion that could be deepened on the levels of “doing with space” and “space at proof”. However, I personally regret that the existential approach has been put into the second row. The authors suggest it must be “improved” (6:12) to make “progress” (6:13), but to my opinion, both approaches are complementary and it would be very interesting to know how the authors see the relation between existence and performance.

Here, the proposition of a “situational geography” (3:20, 4:19, 17:6) seems to be very interesting. To my opinion, the generic understanding of “space”, a common black box for nearly all geographers, has to be overcome and, therefore, the use of “modes of space” as a controversial object of social dispute is indicated. This was at least the intention of Henri Lefebvre when he developed his contributions which later gave rise to the “spatial conjuncture” in American geography and sociology (see SOJA 1989). So, while the discussion of “doing with space” is not so new (see, for example, Gregory and Werlen in the 1980s), the implicit epistemological categorization of “modes of spaces” is (cf. DÖRING, THIELMANN 2008 on the spatial turn). To be more clear, when all practice is seen as spatial (3:24), our progress since Immanuel Kant is little; but when “practice” constructs “spaces” in different forms and categories (places, regions, atmospheres, sceneries, environments etc.), we enter into the actual discussion of “spatiality” (SOJA 1989) and the “geographic turn” (LEVY 1999). Here, it can be discussed of how we conceptualize space, extending the marxist social view (Lefebvre) to other categories of spatialization. Then, different practices result in different modes of space (musicians create different spaces than planners, historians others than ecological communities). Now a thorough non-essentialist discussion of “situation” would be fruitful, and it seems to me that this is the direction (but not yet the explicit result) of this contribution.

Vices

In spite of the text’s innovative character, the article presents some serious vices. So it exposes a very confusing contextualization in philosophical and methodological aspects, and some parts of the text are more obscure than clarifying.

1. As such, it must be mentioned that the article is completely overloaded with loosely cited references (and these citations are nearly never indicated with pages). Furthermore, it combines epistemological traditions which are not really – at least in my view – interconnected. Some examples:

- ▶ Example I, 2:17-3:8 (17 lines): cites Knorr-Cetina, Schatzki, Teather, Crouch, Ley, Laurier, Elias, Beaverstock, Tuan, Relph – this means 10 authors and each with a different idea in 17 lines!
- ▶ Example II, 6:14-6:25 (11 lines): Plato, Heidegger, Casey, Entrikin. Here, 4 authors in 11 lines are cited throughout 2.500 years!

2. Also, there is a problem with double hermeneutics (GIDDENS 1991). Throughout the argument it is never clear whether “practice” is discussed as an object of investigation or as a conception tool. Such a lack of differentiation hampers the full comprehension of the ideas, and the reader often is participating in unnecessary shifts between both levels.

- ▶ Please, see especially my remarks on section 2.

3. The text is over-systematized. Sometimes these structures remain outside of any argumentative logics, especially when it enumerates excessively positions of authors. Some examples for excessive enumerations:

- ▶ Example I, 8:5-9:1: Space in “four movements” (and 13 lines!): space as synthesis (Elias), space as formal-classifying concept (Werlen), space as indeterminate *khora* (Derrida), space as a specific quality (without author). The enumeration still remains open-ended without any conclusion.

► Example II, 9:3-10:4: “Coping with space, pragmatism” (22 lines, 4 very diverse items, not much oriented towards “pragmatism”): Certeau - arts of doing, Foucault - spatial metaphors and concepts, Schütz - phenomenological(!) approach & Lebenswelt, Goffman and Thomas - situated action.

4. It seems that the overall important point of “spatiality through practice”, mentioned as a foundational concept (4:16), is not really explained, though it is to my opinion the crucial point for the argument (but see the exception of 4:11-5:9). For a much better explanation see, for example, LUSSAULT 2007, p. 147-190.

In spite of such structural problems in the argument, I am interested to see the authors’ ideas exposed to a broader public. Consequently, I follow up the sections of the article making specific remarks and some inconclusive suggestions.

A critical revision of the text

1 Introduction

The philosophical and theoretical foundations of the argument are exposed in a (fuzzy) introduction. The Intro first refers to the “question of practice” and the “practice turn” (2:14-3:8), then goes to “pragmatism” as a philosophical approach (3:9-3:19), and finally turns to what is called the “pragmatics of space”. Here, it delineates first the constitution of space, and secondly the mobilization of space (3:20-4:10). In the end, it gives a brief outline on how the authors understand the relation of “practice” and “space” through spatiality and situation (4:11-5:9).

A short and clear introduction is welcome. So I suggest that authors and approaches that do not have any foundational importance for the construction of the argument should be withdrawn (e.g., Ley, Elias, 2:20-3:1). I would only expose those references that focus directly on the practice turn and the performative approach (do not forget to clarify what is understood by “practice” and “performative action”, but see section 2.2.).

- It is recommendable that a preliminary difference between action-theory and practice should be made in the beginning, however, only if the authors perceive such a difference. Otherwise it should be explained why both terms are used without distinctions.
- Some parts of the Intro could be withdrawn completely. For example, the lengthy but sketchy recapitulation of four different cognitive approaches (3:1-3:8), and the curious “invention” of national traditions (3:12-3:17, see, for example, Schütz and Goffman as French!!).
- The prime question of this section seems to be the discussion on “practice through space” and “practicing place/space” (3:20-4:10), followed by a clear definition of “spatiality/spatialities” and “situation” (4:10-4:20).
- The question of “actants” (footnote 5) should be either omitted or fully included. I personally think that the argument on “actants” is crucial, however, the continuation of the text shows less interest in such a broad concept, as it is

largely restricted (eventually unconsciously) to humane actors. This omits the profound possibilities of the “actant concept” in general, which includes things, institutions, symbols and ideas. A better inclusion of the concept, however, would need a better discussion of “action” in a more non-modern and less anthropocentric way (Latour).

- The paragraph 5:10-5:15 is not necessary, as the prime question is already (and differently!) exposed in 4:1ff.

2 Why a “pragmatic of space” (my suggestion: “Pragmatics of space: being, doing, practice”

To me, this section appears the most confusing, as “action/practice” are sometimes exposed as an object of empirical reflection (5:17-6:8, 7:1-7:20), but sometimes appear as epistemological positions (6:14-20; 9:3-10:4).

2.1. From “being in space” towards “doing with space”.

- My suggestion is first to discuss “being in space” and “doing with space” from an epistemological standpoint, highlighting both existentialism and pragmatism (including Dewey and Goffman!, but omitting Foucault who does not really combine with the pragmatist approach). Therefore, my recommendation: unite 6:14-6:20 and 9:3-10:4 in one sequence.
- The paragraph on “practice in relation to space” (7:1-7:20) should be transferred into section 2.2.
- I am not sure, whether the part on different “spatial concepts” (7:21-9:2) is really necessary for the argument, especially as it is so much abbreviated that it melts down to a very arbitrary selection.

2.2. Approaches to practice in geography

- Section 7:1-7:20 could be inserted in the beginning of the section to demonstrate that space is constructed in a practice-oriented approach as a complementary term to action, and not subordinated. Therefore, neither a pre-conceived space, nor a socio-spatial dialectical space separating space from action and even not a phenomenological space (according to Heidegger’s dwelling) are at stake here.
- 10:12-10:20 can be omitted.
- The text 10:20-22 could be organized in a structured manner according to the three understandings of practice: action, performativity, situatedness (here, in fact, the authors make a clear difference between action and practice, but do not account for it with a clear definition).
- 1. Action as practice (not practice as action!) is created, according to Werlen and Giddens (please make your references clear, including pages) through three “rationalities”, here called “regimes” (why?): an instrumental goal-oriented

rationality, a norm-oriented rationality and a communication-oriented rationality. I recommend the use of the original expressions of Benno WERLEN (1987, chapter 5) when he follows Weber to avoid confusions (10:25-11:15). Unfortunately, the authors try to open the field still for other rationalities but then refer to “spatial categories” (and not rationalities!). Though this shift is not a serious problem, it is recommendable to cite the spatial categories more clearly, as in LUSSAULT (2007, e.g. p. 81-88, please indicate the pages). My question: Why are the categories of the article different from those of the book? I personally prefer the version of the article.

- 2. Performativity as practice (11:25-12:14) involves a more corporal engagement, building up space from corporal action and not from rationality. The critical positions on this approach appear very weak. So it is evident that the approach focuses on something leaving “other kinds of approaches in the dark” (12:8); every approach does this. Also, it is completely clear that a bodily approach involves basically the micro-scale (though emotional atmospheres also reach longer distances, see Sloterdijk) (12:9-12:11). Only the third critical remark can be sustained, at least to my opinion (12:11-12:14). A question which is not tackled, however, is the question of the spatial categories of the performative concept, parallel to those of “action as practice”.
- 3. Open engagement as practice (12:15-13:7) is based on the ideas of ethnomethodology, forming social cohesion through the open application of rules in interaction. Here, in contrast to the pre-existing rationalities of the action-approach, the rules are the result of interaction. They are “situated” in contexts. Again, the epistemological position and the investigated object are mixed: ethnomethodology is an epistemological approach (though the misleading name indicates a method), situatedness and the creation of rules are empirical objects. Once more, the spatial question is omitted, it should be inserted.
- A conclusive statement on space seems to be necessary in a follow-up paragraph. This could focus on the performative creation of spatial logics, highlighting the empirical aspect of practice. I would not include the very vague epistemological statement on whether we speak of explanation, description, concept, law, rule or pattern (13:7-13:11); it is not at all conclusive for the argument. However, I would draw attention to the “pragmatics of space” that require situatedness. In “pragmatics” rules are situated, interactions create situations and the corporal and spherical aspect does appear as well as the environmental atmosphere of the situation (cf. SLOTERDIJK 2002).

3 “Doing with space” – space as “proof” (my suggestion: space “at proof”)

This part reads much more fluid than the second section, therefore, fewer suggestions. I recommend a small introduction to point to the two basic aspects of the section. It seems to me that *faire avec l'espace* still goes more into the direction of “being in space”, though it is already fully developing as “acting in space”. *Espace à l'épreuve*, however, is different. Here, it is space and the spatial categories themselves that are contested. They are “at proof”. This means, for example, that when an environmental

activist group questions a development project, it puts “at proof” whether the project follows a capitalist spatial rationality, an ecological spatial rationality, or a sociological rationality.

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

This section is still a little vague, as the relationship between the actors (actants) and space is not carefully discussed. The original problem is not the expression of a translation (13:14), as the authors put it, but the link between practice and space (spatiality). Furthermore, the difference between “with space” and “space at proof” is not very transparent (the problem could be remedied already in 3.0). If I understand correctly (sure, I may interpret the text wrongly, but other readers might do the same), actants gain their spatiality through action, that does mean that each single act creates its own spatiality. In this case, “with space” is referred to the action which has space as “*circonstance*”. According to the Actor-Network-Theory, also the actant of the action is an event as a result of *circonstance*, so that also the actant has its space (see LUSSAULT 2007, p. 149). Then, we have two conceptions of space, that of action (movement) and that of the actant (event).

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

The title of this section should be parallel to 3.1., for example: **Of practices: “espace à l’épreuve”**. At this point, another dimension of space is arising: “space at proof”. This spatial conception, in addition to 3.1., refers to the conflict of inter-action. Now it is the spaces themselves that are conflictive, as their actions are conflictive. So, spaces and their spatialities (now in a multiple form) are linked to the “inter”. If such an understanding is correct, then ‘3.1.’ should start with the explanation of different activations of space. These activated actions may be interacting with the environment, with other persons or with other elements; they are, for example, perception, cognition, conception, construction, emotion, intention, playing etc. Following this idea, space does not appear any more in an all-encompassing function (to me still a Kantian relict and not very useful here), instead it can be transferred epistemologically to the concrete environment of action, truly following the intentions of the authors. A conclusion for the structuring of the text would be: acts and actants in “3.1.”, interaction in “3.2.”.

Referring to the introduction of this section, again the problem is not so much the translation, but the concept itself. Therefore, 14:20-15:6 could be shortened, but 15:7-16:1 should be considerably expanded and sustained with broad references (with page indications!).

- The discussion is on “épreuve” and how proof is at stake and, thus, the aforementioned dimensions developed by Werlen and Giddens could be reintegrated. They refer to communication, domination (power), and legitimation as the “rationalities” and “practices” of proving. I suggest that the French quotations should be translated into English.

- I like very much 16:2-17:1. In this part, space is tested and contested through experience (reminding, however, that experience never was defined, so it deserves a footnote!). The last sentence of the paragraph (16:19-17:1) should be changed to “This might also provide us with the solutionof the constitution of society: social and spatial structures do not exist for themselves, they are only stabilized in culturally and socially produced situations through practices, within which actors ... update.... competences.”
- Again, the last phrase (17:2-17:3) is not convincing, so it could be left out.

4 Conditions of possibility of pragmatics of space

I would reformulate the headline: **Of situations: from instance to arrangement.** It seems to me that three different subjects are approached: Situation as *hic et nunc* (17:5-17:21), situation as an interpretative context (18:1-18:22), and situation as arrangement (19:1-19:20). Part 19:21-20:9 would better fit in a conclusion.

- “Situation as *hic et nunc*“ (17:11-17:21) should be a paragraph separated from the introduction of this section. I am curious in learning more about the dimensions of “input” into the spot of *hic et nunc*, e.g. the temporal input (past/future), the social input (interaction from outside) and the spatial input (contact with different spaces). The phrase 17:13-16 seems to be inconclusive, it should be revised.
- “Situation as interpretative contextualization” (18:1-18:23): Again, the question whether epistemological or empirical reflections are exposed is a problem. In this case, it is not quite clear whether the “arbitrary background of interpretation” comes from the researcher who reinterprets situations (18:4-18:7) or whether it is part of the performative situation and derives from other actors (18:7-18:11). The choice of an interpretative language (a language game) is of main importance, so it should be highlighted more intensely (18:11-18:14). When the outcome of such choices is described, the reader needs to know what kind of languages have been used to identify the different places that are mentioned in the text (18:14-18:17): “Paradise” is part of a religious discourse, “Paris” part of a literary discourse (at least in the bourgeois culture), “banlieue” pertains to a social discourse of urban planners, and so on. The question of learning is distorting the attention from the main argument (or deserves an ample explanation). To my opinion, all the examples of 18:18-18:22 are very loosely connected. I suggest: omit these 5 lines.
- “Situation as arrangement” (19:1-19:20) refers to the aforementioned multiplicity of “space”, putting the question of its essentiality in the forefront (dynamic versus static). The part reads well. But the conclusion that the pragmatic approach represents a “competitive advantage” (19:18) sounds very mercantile. I would speak of adequacy, which means that an “open space” (movement, event) needs an “adequate” epistemological position. In other cases, for example in mathematics, a pre-defined and fixed space is essential and therefore adequate.

5 Conclusion

My suggestion is to write a separate conclusion. In this respect, it is striking that nearly all the examples which are cited (19:25-20:3) are describing an “overcoming” of traditional divisions, binaries and oppositions. Thus, “overcoming” points directly to fluidity, carrying the concept of space with it and thus refuses a conception of space as difference, both from an empirical and an epistemological perspective. “Practice” as a key concept follows the same pattern, as it is fluid in itself going from the past to the future (temporal component), linking the body to its environment (spatial component) and swinging between interpretative schemes (meaning). Here, the pragmatic approach creates a critical standpoint towards actual dialectical or normative space conceptions, putting it “at proof” while assuming its fluidity. Consequently, action theory gains a new meaning as a tool for the explaining of “Weltbindung”: but now it does not only explain the tying, but also the loosening or even the cutting of the tie through developing, deciphering and contradicting space.

Concluding the Review

I hope that my interactive commentary reading has helped to clarify the stylistic and structural problems of the text and makes the argument more convincing. Though I might have been very incisive and even disrespectful in some of my critical remarks for “restructuring”, I tried to find the constructive pillars and remove any citation ornament. To my opinion, a profound revision of the text would help considerably to design a pathway through the exposed positions. I myself have experienced my readings as a passage through a dense and forest-like network of crossing perspectives, and I had to use my cutless to open the way. Often, I was even left with perplexities on contradicting arguments, however, later I realized the profoundness of the argument. Therefore, the text should be cleared, like a clearing in the forest: less would be more, and a less overloaded text would shed more light on the subject being a very convincing argument.

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