Social Geography Discussions

Interactive comment on "Intercultural interaction and "situational places": a perspective for urban cultural geography within and beyond the performative turn" *by* P. Dirksmeier and I. Helbrecht

M. Boeckler (Referee)

marc.boeckler@uni-mainz.de

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I very much enjoyed reading "Intercultural Interaction and 'situational places'". This is a well accessible, clearly structured and innovative paper. With "situational places" the authors develop a new perspective for cultural urban geography that could help to come to terms with some of the mundane problems of today's global age. "Situational places" are always temporarily made for, with and only through intercultural interactions. Taking this conception serious as a potential tool for urban planning, it could – according to the authors – solve or mitigate some of the ethnic tension arising particularly in contempo-

rary (world society's) cities. It was fascinating to see how the paper paints a colorful collage of previously unrelated material. Situational places emerge as a textual pastiche of the recent performative turn, Luhman's system theory, Bateson's concept of schismogenesis and a relational account of place inspired by Doreen Massey's work. At times I was secretly amused by the hidden irony of this wordy arrangement. Large parts are written very much in line with the eclectic stance of poststructural and post-colonial cultural geography, deliberately (so I suppose) without drawing on the usual suspects of this strand of thought: No mentioning of Derrida or Deleuze of Bhabha or Hall. Despite my unconditional support of the paper, there are quite a few statements and claims I would like to contest. I will concentrate on two connected major ambiguities I consider crucial for the whole argument. Both points deal with the assumed "newness" and the implicit essentialism of the paper.

The paper develops a strictly theatrical, dramaturgical notion of performance with a rather uncontested take on the individual and the subject. In a nutshell: "performances are thought of, interpreted, and analyzed from the individual's point of view" (p.7). This concept of a pre-given individual is in numerous ways surprising. In my opinion the most influential strand of the recent performative turn (from Butler to Non-Representational-Theory) is concerned with the very processes of subjectification. Here, "the individual" is not given, but the ephemeral outcome of distributed performances. This raises a few questions: If we are to think of places as situational outcomes, as the authors argue, why shouldn't we think of individuals in the same way – as temporarily stabilized effects of processes of individualization and subjectification? Occasionally I was reminded at Richard Sennet's aphoristical definition "that a city is a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet". Sennet wrote of a "public geography" where "the street" becomes a "stage" that emerges always and only as "immediate situation" because "in a milieu of strangers, the people who witness one's actions, declarations, and professions (. . .) have no knowledge of one's history (. . .)" (Sennet 1977: 39). Therefore, if we accept the idea of given individuals that interact in cities, what does the concept of "situational places" add to Sennet's "public geogra-

phy"? According to the authors it is "culture". Dirksmeier and Helbrecht conclude that "places could be conceptualized as the performance of interactions between strangers with different cultural backgrounds" (p.13). But, if the underlying performances are strictly individual, then why is the category of culture needed to develop "situational places"? What is the categorical differentiation between the interaction of two strangers and two strangers with "different cultural background"?

My second discontent is related to the above cited use of the term "cultural background". Even though the authors try to de-essentialize culture, when culture is tied to the notion of situational places, it emerges once again as a pre-given, structural property of members of ethnic groups in the sense of an unchangeable, essentially incorporated, deterministic "background": If places but not cultures are the temporary, performative result of intercultural interactions, then culture has to be thought of as even more solid than the material setting of the performed places, more solid than concrete and steel. Now, even if one follows this argument, it is not comprehensible why "culture contact" in respect to situational places is conceptualized "as a binary of the two cultures in contact" (p.12). Why two? Why not three, five, ten? Why should culture contact in multiethnic cities occur only between two different cultures? On the other hand, what would happen to the binary concept of schismogenesis if there is a multitude of (cultural) differences at play? Shouldn't we rather conceive of culture as the temporary outcome of these differentiating practices going on in urban settings – just as practice theory does in general, or NRT does in geography? In this way the "inter" in "intercultural" could be taken seriously as a true "inbetween" instead of a simple "between", an inbetween that is neither the one nor the other, but a third culture tied to the place making practices. But, of course, much of this has already been brought forward by thirty years of postcolonial reworking of place and culture so that the novelty of the argument would be contested.

Well, these nitpicking interventions might be a bit too much influenced by my own poststructuralist reading of cultural theory. Maybe some empirical material would help

to sustain the conceptual argument. Anyhow, I enjoyed reading this very stimulating paper and hope it can trigger some debate.

Sennet, Richard 1977. The Fall of Public Man. New York (Knopf).

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