



Spatiality and Sociality

Viktor Berger: Térré szőtt társadalmiság. A tér kategóriája a szociológiaelméletekben

[Sociality Woven into Space. The Category of Space in Sociological Theories]¹

In recent decades, a significant transformation – relevant to spatial theory – has been taking place in the field of theoretical sociology. While previously sociology regarded space merely as the environment of social actions, existing independently from the people, according to the new approach, space itself is a product of society, and sociality and spatiality are inseparable and interconnected. It is a connection, the two components of which are constructing one another: social actions – in a Lefebvrian perspective – produce spaces, which, in turn, determine social conditions. However, relational sociology focusing on the relativity of sociality and spatiality does not have the necessary potential to become a pronounced helper of the age diagnostic tasks of sociology yet. According to Viktor Berger, in order to develop this potential, first, the appropriate definition of space has to be developed, as authors of the concepts of spatial sociology do not consider that borrowing concepts from other disciplines leads to a reinterpretation of their content (p. 227). He warns that sociology has to become able to develop the problem of space in compliance with its own methodology and disciplinary attributes. The handbook presenting the spatial theories of sociology and following the method of historical reconstruction of the concepts strives to aid the process of solving this issue.

Besides reputable sociologists, it also introduces authors who are not primarily regarded as sociologists, but their inclusion in the book is justified by their insights and results, which could prove to be useful for the relationist sociology of space that is in the main focus of the author. As such, a significant number of the discussed authors do not have a systematic concept of spatial sociology, while their works analysed by Berger suggest a shift towards the relationist approach. Berger not only presents but reviews; he mostly analyses the different approaches of spatial theory from the perspective of Martina Löw's review.

Instead of exploring the causes of the spatial turn, the book discusses the development of the theoretical foundations of relationist spatial sociology and

1 Published by L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2018.

argues for the usefulness of this concept of space and spatial sociology, taking into account the limitations of theory as well. Before discussing the various concepts of spatial theory of the authors, he provides an overview of the wider disciplinary environment affecting the theoretical thinking of sociology. The theoretical basis of the differences between the absolutist and the relativist concepts of space can be understood through physics and philosophy. Sociology leaned towards the dualism of the absolutist concept of space for a long time, thinking about space as a background or container of objects, and defined society as a unit closely connected to a clearly defined area (country, administrative unit). Although the majority of the discussed authors distanced themselves from the absolutist concept of space, there are some in the works of whom there are traces of absolutism, writes Berger. One example of this could be Maurice Halbwachs, who rejects the absolutist concept the least and according to whom space is nothing more than the background of social activity; Émile Durkheim's morphological concept was closely connected to the absolutist concept of space – although, as Berger sees it, his social morphological analyses go beyond the absolutist concept of space.

The author chose the method of historical reconstruction of sociology to present the pathfinding of sociology that ultimately led it to a relativist position, which – focusing on relations – is the most suitable for its constitutional features. According to the relationist view, rejecting the dualism of space and sociality, the space surrounding us is not homogeneous but a combination of created spaces – hence, a social construction. In order to define this concept, the author follows the apparatus and insights of Henri Lefebvre – regarded as a pioneer of relationist spatial sociology –, according to which space is not a container space, it cannot be reduced to limited physical spaces and spatial distances. Spaces are objectified relations, simultaneously created by people and things, which contain human actions and generate new ones. This view is present in the works of Barry Schwartz, Michel Foucault, and Georg Simmel as well as in the Chinese concept of space analysed by Marcel Granet – less known in sociologist circles –, in which space is not a homogeneous container but the totality of relational spaces of various qualities. Berger's view on the matter is that the theories and approaches that only consider space as the stage of human movement and activity, defining its concept as existing independently from the people, do not understand the essence of sociality. On the other hand, the sociocultural environment is an artificial, intersubjective creation, in which 'the created objectivity reflects onto the actor' (p. 12). This same view can be recognized in the morphology of Marcel Mauss, which points out the active human organization of spaces. However, the philosophical price of accepting the theories of spatial sociology is high – it can only make sense of the network of space and actors if it abandons the concept of the acting individual: there is no autonomic individual and action, there are only action networks, in which 'the most diverse elements are interwoven: humans

and all kinds of non-humans (objects, living beings, symbolic creations)’ (p. 240).

Berger also interprets the attempts to define space in the context of sociology from the perspective of the various structure and action theories determining it. The representatives of action theory – such as Norbert Elias, Alfred Schütz, and Erving Goffman – contemplate the space-altering effect of social processes. Berger’s analysis focuses on the spatial sociological concept of Martina Löw – also categorized under the action theory and serving the author’s goals well – as ‘the spatial theory outlined by Löw is capable of handling a number of problems that absolutist concepts of space are not, [as] it thinks of space as something created and relative’ (p. 212). Nonetheless, Berger also criticizes Löw, who ‘embeds the novel and relational definition of spaces into a social theory that, due to its unique conceptuality, did not let the relational features fully develop’ (p. 221). The conceptual ambiguity disapproved – by Berger – at Löw is present in the case of almost every author – points out Berger – whose concepts of spatial sociology might show decidedly relationist features but still fail to create a complete relationist theory.

Moving beyond theoretical experiments of structure theory representatives Georg Simmel, Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens, John Urry strives to relieve the dichotomy of structure and action through the thematization of movements, while Rob Shields does it through the concept of social spatialization. Regardless of how much more dominant action theory seems to be than structure theory, according to Berger, neither of these theoretical positions are superior to the other. He makes their application dependent on the research area and objective, and, as he says, as a result, ‘we do not need a dominant relational concept of space as much as accepting the diversity of the different approaches and exploiting the benefits that come with it’ (p. 237). In fact, the last chapter of the book questions the necessity of structuralist and action theoretical categorizations. Berger believes that the conceptuality of such categorization ‘has some inherent issues, such as not being able to permanently abandon the contrast of space and society’ (p. 238), which is another argument for the need for introducing a new conceptuality.

In Berger’s view, sociology needs a combination of Löw’s spatial sociology and the insights of the action network theory; these create the conditions – by providing an appropriate concept of space and conceptual clarification – for a modern and consistently relational concept of space. Besides being useful, even essential for empirical sociology, the theoretical reconceptualization successfully conducted by Berger can also add important insights to the field of psychology or other social sciences.

Lili Gombor

student

Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Department of Philosophy