The political place of locality studies

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Received 18 May 1990; in revised form 14 June 1990

Abstract. In this paper the reasons for studying local areas are examined, and in particular the context of the recent Changing Urban and Regional System Initiative in the United Kingdom. The focus is especially on the sociopolitical context of those studies. The argument is that the reasons for studying localities were in this case both historically and geographically specific. Some confusions around locality studies are also examined, in particular their incorrect equation with concrete research, description, the impact of the spatial on the social, and the postmodern. The discussion then turns to some recent arguments, especially those of Harvey, which imply that local foci are not progressive; the various strands of this position are examined and debated. All this raises the more fundamental question of what is meant by the terms place and locality.

Introduction: space, politics, and locality research

At a number of points in the rich debate about locality studies in the United Kingdom, various authors have made various assumptions about the reasons for pursuing this kind of research in the first place. The different positions of the particular contributors have, however, unlike other aspects of the discussion, rarely been linked together into a debate. Yet it is clearly an important issue. For one thing, it will crucially affect the way locality studies, as a category and individually, are evaluated. It is difficult adequately to assess research without understanding its aims in the first place, both in order to have something to evaluate it against and because the objectives may themselves be open to evaluation. For another thing, this issue of the aims of locality studies links into a wider debate about our role as academics or intellectuals and the relationship of our work to current political issues and debates (Walker, 1989). The purpose of the present paper is simply to reflect upon some of the reasons why the programme of locality studies called the Changing Urban and Regional System (CURS) was first proposed and developed.

One of the most striking things about the assumptions most often made by commentators about the reasons for the programme is that, although most of them come from people who would define themselves as being ‘on the left’, they almost never refer to politics, and more particularly to the political situation in which the issue of locality studies was being raised. If politics does enter the question, then it usually does so in one of two ways (and sometimes both at once). On the one hand it is assumed by some that Marxist theory or the mechanics of accumulation at a grand scale are always and everywhere politically ‘OK’ things to work on. On the other hand it is argued, or asserted, that studying ‘the local’ or ‘place’ is necessarily politically problematic. [Among the few exceptions is the interesting discussion by Jonas (1988).]

The idea for the current focus on locality studies arose in the United Kingdom of the early 1980s. From the end of the 1960s there had been clear intimations

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(1) The author was the initiator of the original proposal, and responsible for drawing up the original outline. The funders and the participants subsequently developed and implemented the programme in greater detail and as a product of their own ideas and research.
economy at least, and maybe society more widely, was entering a period of significant change. There was an accelerating shift away from manufacturing, a noticeable increase in registered unemployment, a continuing transformation of the occupational structure, and so on. The major social changes which appeared to be heralded by these economic shifts also provoked political reflection. It was a set of processes which were further heightened by the events of the early 1980s. The debates about flexibilisation and 'post-Fordism' and the continued presence in power of a right-wing Conservative government, and the failure of the Labour Party to exercise any hold over the imaginations of the majority, reinforced the feeling that an era was at an end. There was a major political debate, initiated by Eric Hobsbawm, about whether the 'forward march of labour' had been halted, about whether the 'natural' (a term which was anyway highly questionable) social base of the Labour Party was being inexorably eroded, about the fragmentation of the working class (or was it merely that that fragmentation, and internal conflicts of interest, were only now being recognised?), indeed about the role of class as a primary political organising principle at all. Marxism Today was developing its analyses of structural change and their (usually depressing) political implications and outlining its theory of Thatcherism and of the potential new ideological hegemony.

Although these debates did not take place primarily within human geography as an academic discipline, they related to it in a number of ways. For one thing, among the significant changes under way in British society, some of the most important ones were geographical. There was a spatial restructuring as an integral part of the social and economic. The economies of the big manufacturing cities went into severe decline. The bases of the heavy-industry regions were undermined. There was decentralisation of both population and employment from big cities outwards to more rural areas and, in some parts of the period, from core regions to the old industrial periphery. The increase in paid employment for women, and the shifts in balance between male and female employment, happened differentially across the country. The so-called high-technology industries, and the hugely expanding banking, finance, and professional services sectors transformed the South East region. More recently, there has been a noticeable, if spatially restricted, transformation of parts of once declining inner cities. Waterfronts everywhere are being revitalised into expensive housing and trendy offices; the Docklands, in London's eastern area, became for a while so much a symbol of the transformative impact of Mrs Thatcher's government that she began her 1987 election campaign there. Indeed, much of what was going on seemed to be about 'places' and their reconstitution in some way or another.

Moreover, and more urgently significant in a political sense for some, the organisational base of the left was being affected by spatial changes as well as by changes in the national economy and society (Lane, 1982; Massey, 1983; Massey and Miles, 1984). Perhaps more than anything else, the very fact that the national structural changes themselves involved a geographical restructuring meant that people in different parts of the country were experiencing highly contrasting shifts, and that even the trajectories of change (for example, in class structure) could be quite different in one place from in another. And, especially because it is not simply final outcomes but processes of change which are significant to people's experience of their world, this meant that the political implications of these 'structural changes' were likely also to be highly contrasting between one place and another. Moreover, this spatial variation was reinforced by the fact that people in different parts of the country had distinct traditions and resources to draw on in their interpretation of, and their response to, these changes.
It was also the case that a great deal of immediate politics, both on the part of the government and in terms of oppositional political activity had a clearly and, more importantly, explicitly local base. Perhaps the most obvious example was the rise of what came to be called ‘the new urban left’. In a number of major cities, of which London and the Greater London Council were only the most prominent example, a new radical left (both within and independent of the local state) became one of the main foci of opposition both to the government and to the labourist politics of the leadership of the main opposition party.

The complexity of this geography of restructuring, its reverberations, and the political responses to it, had a number of important implications. First, it meant that some of the debates being conducted solely at national level, and some of the conclusions being drawn from them, were quite simply unsubstantiable at that level in any rigorous sense. Across the political spectrum, causal connections were being made between changes in employment and occupational structure and wider social, ideological, and political changes. We were facing the end of the working class, the end of class politics, a new ideology of individualism, a politics of consumption, the dominance of what were referred to as ‘new social movements’. All this was being argued, most frequently, from national-level statistics. Yet, quite apart from the difficulty of establishing such causal connections in the first place and the dubiousness of the economistic form in which they were usually proposed, the issues of spatial scale and spatial variation were usually ignored. And yet presumptions of cause and effect made at national level were clearly untenable when each of the component causal processes, which were supposedly interacting, was taking place unevenly (and differently so) over the national space. Further, the relation between political, cultural, and economic changes may have an important local level of operation. In other words, some of the causal processes which were being appealed to in the debate could not be seen as operating at national level only.

Second, spatial variation meant that the potential, the problems, and even the style of political response and organisation would be different in distinct parts of the country. Conclusions drawn at national level about policy implications and changes in political strategy could not be assumed to be universally applicable, to resonate in the same way with the particular traditions and circumstances in different parts of the country. At perhaps the most trivial, but certainly the most easily documented, political level it was clear that the voting patterns of individual social groups were becoming increasingly geographically differentiated.

Third, recognising variation in no way implies abandoning wider movements or wider levels of organisation. But local contrasts did mean that it was not possible to construct them by simply proclaiming that each local change was underlain by capitalism—that is, by simply asserting ‘the general’. It also required, for a solid foundation, a recognition and understanding of the reality and conditions of diversity, and of the actual processes which linked the local particularities (Massey, 1983).

The fact of spatial variation in national change, in other words, had immediate and obvious political importance. It became important to know just how differently national and international changes were impacting on different parts of the country. Something that might be called ‘restructuring’ was clearly going on, but its implications both for everyday life and for the mode and potential of political organising were clearly highly differentiated and we needed to know how. It was in this context

(2) The argument here is directed to ‘the left’ because that is the debate which I am addressing. But parallel points could be made about relevance across the political spectrum. Government departments, for instance, displayed interest in the geographical variation in penetration of the ‘enterprise culture’.
that the localities projects in the United Kingdom were first imagined and proposed. It was research with an immediate, even urgent, relevance beyond academe.

The local, the concrete, and the postmodern
This history has a number of implications. It contradicts a number of other retrospective interpretations.

It is not, for instance, the case that the study of locality is a necessary vehicle for, nor equivalent to, empirical research or the study of concrete phenomena. This question has generated confusion. The issues of specificity and empirical uniqueness were on the agenda in the same period, and again as part of wider movements, in philosophy, the social sciences beyond geography, and the humanities. Localities are certainly 'specific' in this context in the sense that one of the prime aims, given the social and political background outlined above, was precisely to understand their differences. [This does not, of course, mean that they are unrelated and one of the aims of such locality research has to be (and was in this case) to understand, not just the interdependencies between localities in the sense of direct links, but the ways in which, in part, the changes going on in them were products of a wider restructuring.] In this case, then, the counterposition is between general (meaning wider) and specific (meaning more local). Some commentators, however, have at this point fallen into the trap of eliding the fact of being specific in this sense with that of being 'concrete', the product of many determinations. They then reason that, because localities are in this sense concrete, only localities are concrete. Here, the elision is between the dimensions specific-general and concrete-abstract. Thus Harvey and Scott (forthcoming) get themselves into a confusion over precisely this issue. And Duncan (1989) comments that what he calls the "social" reasons for using the term locality, and which he argues are "quite as important as its scientific use" are often "to signify one's concern for the empirical and concrete" (page 222). Yet the current world economy, for instance, is no less concrete than a local one. The world economy is general in the sense of being a geographically large-scale phenomenon to which can be counterposed internal variations. But it is also unequivocally concrete as opposed to abstract. It is no more than a local economy, the simple manifestation of the capitalist mode of production. It is, just as much, a specific product of many determinations. Those who conflate the local with the concrete, therefore, are confusing geographical scale with processes of abstraction in thought.

Moreover, those who make this mistake then frequently rush headlong into another: they confuse the study of the local with description, which they oppose to theoretical work. Smith (1987), for instance, seems to be arguing that locality research is necessarily descriptive in these terms. There are a number of problems with this argument. First, in the form in which Smith puts it, it is an accusation which could only ever be made from a view of the world which equated empirical generalisability with explanation, a position which the theoretical basis of the CURS localities approach most clearly rejected. There is an assumption behind it that "theory" is "opposed to a concern with specificity or uniqueness", a position which is untenable "unless one wants to argue that theory cannot grasp the unique and hence the perception of the unique is theory-neutral—an idea which died at least twenty years ago with the demise of the concept of a theory-neutral observation language" (Sayer, 1989, page 303). Second, this argument continues the confusion between the dimensions concrete-abstract and local-general. Yet the fact that a phenomenon is 'more general' in the simple sense of being 'bigger' does not make it any more amenable to theoretical analysis. Third, this is true not only because both levels are the product of many determinations, but also because abstract
analysis can be just as much about 'small' objects as it is about 'large' ones. As was pointed out above, the fact that in the debate about changes in the United Kingdom some of the conclusions being drawn at national level could not really be drawn at that level, because some of the key significant causal processes were also operative at smaller spatial scales, was one of the reasons behind the locality studies. ‘The local’ (meaning the small-scale) is no less subject to nor useful for theorisation than big, broad, general things. The counterposition of general and local is quite distinct from the distinction between abstract and concrete [see Sayer (1991) for expansion of these issues].

Indeed, when locality research came onto the agenda, new insights into understanding and explanation of concrete phenomena were central to the debate in human geography (Massey, 1984a; Sayer, 1984), and these provided ways into the question of local variation. So the coappearance of an interest in methodology and studies of localities was mutually highly beneficial. But they are not equivalent to each other. These points were made in one of the initial public documents about the establishment of the research programme:

“But if there are reasons, both in policy and in analysis, why such a set of local studies is important now, it is also the case that this is a propitious moment because both theory and method have been and are still being developed in ways which make such analyses more possible. These should not be ‘case studies’, in the sense of idiosyncratic portraits of individual regions. Each study should attempt both to link the fortunes of the local area to the wider national and international scene, which is part of the explanation for the changes taking place, and also rigorously to link together the different levels of change going on within the local area—between economic and social changes for instance. In this context, recent theoretical developments within the field of regional geography will be of major help. The increasing focus on the analysis of particular regions, on the notion of spatial synthesis, on the relation between general processes at national level and specific local outcomes, and on the analysis of places in the wider context of a national spatial division of labour will all give these studies a rigorous theoretical underpinning” (Massey, 1984b, page xv).

There is a difference, then, between the reasons for the importance of local studies at that time, and the conditions provided by theoretical developments which made such analysis more possible.

The same kind of argument must be spelled out (because it seems to be so widely misunderstood) in relation to that oft-quoted slogan ‘geography matters’. Duncan (1989), for instance, rests a large part of his case against the adoption of a notion of locality precisely on the idea that locality research grew out of arguments about the effectivity of spatial form. It is certainly true, as I have already said, that this was a period in which it was increasingly argued that ‘place’ was important. Moreover, the methodologies adopted for the study of localities, for the explanation of uniqueness, emphasised the point in a different way. For it was stressed that, not only was the character of a particular place a product of its position in relation to wider forces (the more general social and economic restructuring, for instance), but also that that character in turn stamped its own imprint on those wider processes. There was mutual interaction (Massey, 1984a). Moreover, the nature of the interaction, of the impact of local specificities on the operation of wider processes, may vary in kind. It may be that it occurs through self-conscious social activity. In the United Kingdom of the early 1980s, it was this which was the political focus of attention and enquiry. As the local political activists aimed to demonstrate in practice and as the localities projects showed in their research, there was a huge variety—of varying effectiveness—of local activity, resistance, and...
promotion (Cooke, 1989; 1990; Harloe et al, 1990). In these cases the focus of the ‘local impact’ was the local government, but it could of course be other agencies, social movements, or constellations of them. Moreover, the mutual conditioning of local and wider processes need not be a product of conscious social agency. Local impact may equally well, indeed more frequently, come about through the structural interaction of social processes without any deliberate local social agency. So studies of localities may certainly endorse the idea that geography matters, but it is an empirical question. Moreover, localities do not by any means exhaust the idea that geography matters. Even at the level of the social and political issues being raised in the early 1980s this was evidently the case. Not just the character of individual places themselves, but the fact, nature, and degree of the differences and interdependencies between them were also having their effect on the wider economy and society. The North–South divides both within the United Kingdom and internationally were (and still are) perhaps the most obvious examples. Within the United Kingdom, uneven development had important impacts both on the national economy (see Massey, 1988) and even on the country’s electoral political future.

At an international level, Arrighi (1990) has recently presented an interesting argument in relation to socialist politics. Thus, the spatial organisation of social relations, and the interpretation of that spatial organisation, has effects in more ways than through the impact of processes related to locality. The facts of distance, betweenness, unevenness, nucleation, copresence, time–space distanciation, settings, mobility and differential mobility, all these affect how specified social relations work; they may even be necessary for their existence or prevent their operation. As we have just seen, the fact of spatial variation itself, and of interdependence—of uneven development—has major implications. ‘Geography matters’ does not just mean ‘locality matters’—it has much wider implications, greater claims to make, than this.

Finally, in this brief tour through things which locality-studies are not, or not necessarily, they are not necessarily part of the turn to the postmodern. That is to say, the debate about locality studies is in principle distinct from the debate about postmodernism. There are, of course, many apparent points of contact [Cooke (1990) has recently explored some of them], but many of these are more the result of the accidents of language than real connections, and none of them amount to real equivalences. Perhaps what a focus on localities can share with the shifts toward postmodernism is a recognition of, and a recognition of the potential significance of, both the local and variety. This, it seems to me, is unequivocally positive. Gregory, in another context, has argued tellingly that “one of the raisons d’être of the human sciences is surely to comprehend the ‘otherness’ of other cultures. There are few tasks more urgent in a multicultural society and an interdependent world, and yet one of modern geography’s greatest betrayals was its devaluation of the specificities of place and of people” (1989, page 358).

Even those who are critical of the philosophical arguments of the postmodernists also recognise at least this characteristic to be potentially progressive. Thus, Harvey writes “How, then, should postmodernism in general be evaluated? My preliminary assessment would be this. That in its concern for difference, for the difficulties of communication, for the complexity and nuances of interests, cultures, places, and the like, it exercises a positive influence” (1989, page 113). The problem, of course, is that postmodernism in its current guise rarely lives up to the democratic potential opened by this move. On the other hand, as Harvey recognises, the recognition of difference is a characteristic which a reformed
modernism could take on board. Thus, first among the developments which he
argues should be attended to, to respond to the current difficulties and criticisms
of the progressive modernist project is

"The treatment of difference and 'otherness' not as something to be added on
to more fundamental Marxist categories (like class and productive forces), but as
something that should be omnipresent from the very beginning in any attempt to
grasp the dialectics of social change" (page 355).

However, there are other ways in which locality studies are sometimes thought
to be closer to postmodernism than they are. One confusion arises over the term
'local' itself. The meaning of the term in the context of locality studies' is not the
same as its meaning when used for instance by Lyotard in his arguments for 'local
determinisms' and the abandonment of grander theories. [There seem, suitably
enough, to be numerous confusions over words. The problems provoked by the
multiple meanings of the term 'specific' were pointed to above, and Sayer (1991)
follows up this issue further. Here it is the term 'local' which is at issue.] Neither
a focus on the empirically local (in terms of geographical scale) nor an insistence
that not all theorisable causal processes operate at the level of global accumulation,
implies local determinism in the sense meant by Lyotard. 'Local' in locality is not
opposed to 'meta' as in 'metatheory'. Once again, there is a potential confusion
between the question of level in terms of geographical scale and level of abstraction
in thought. Let us take one example where the confusion can arise. Harvey (1989,
page 117) writes:

"Postmodernism has us accepting the reifications and partitionings ... all the
fetishisms of locality, place or social grouping, while denying that kind of meta­
theory which can grasp the political-economic processes (money flows, international
divisions of labour, financial markets, and the like) that are becoming ever more
universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily life."

There are a number of points here. First, studying localities does not amount to
fetishising them (I shall address this point again later); nor is Harvey necessarily
saying it does. There is perhaps no disagreement here. Second, locality studies as
I see them, most definitely do not deny the kind of theory which can grasp political-
economic processes such as the international division of labour. The CURS
programme was of course founded on precisely such concepts, and it was axiomatic
that studying local areas necessarily required theories which were wider than their
application to that area both in the sense that they had a broader spatial reach and
in the sense of being more abstract. Such theories need not, though, only relate, as
the quotation seems to imply, to economic phenomena. Third, this seems to be,
precisely, a misuse of the term 'metatheory', confusing the philosophical meaning
with the question of scale. The same confusion arises later in the book when an
acceptance of grand narratives is opposed to an emphasis on community and
locality (page 351). Yet, if they are needed at all, grand narratives are needed just
as much in the study of the local as of the international. Fourth, and more politically,
it is difficult to reconcile this quotation's dismissive treatment of "fetishisms of ...
social groupings" (women, for instance?) with the apparent commitment to a
democratic recognition of the existence of difference cited above. Although post­
modernism certainly has its difficulties in doing anything more democratic than
recognising the existence of others, modernism seems to have problems in really, in
the end, taking seriously the autonomy of others. Thus, just before this quotation,
Harvey writes "Postmodernist philosophers tell us not only to accept but even to
revel in the fragmentations and the cacophony of voices through which the
dilemmas of the modern world are understood" (page 116). He opposes such a
position absolutely. I know what he means, and I have some sympathy. But I also
have real reservations about this formulation. At one, very practical level, there seems to me to be not enough fragmentation at the moment. At least in the context of some political debates, there seems sometimes to be one megaphone—that of reaction. But that raises the second point in relation to Harvey's position: you cannot argue for the right to oppose when others are in power (and that includes being in power even within 'the left') if you will not allow it when the situation is reversed. Put together, all these quotations seem to say that it is OK to have a background orchestra of others, so long as you yourself are the conductor. Thus to return to the original issue of the meaning of the word 'local', the argument here is not that some local studies may not adopt a postmodern approach, indeed as Harvey points out (page 47), Fish (1980) has understood 'local determinism' to mean 'localities' such as interpretative communities and particular places; but it is to argue that the one does not necessarily entail the other.

Again, the debate about the postmodern has brought with it a sudden recognition of, indeed a revelling in, the importance of space and place. It is a realisation, a sudden discovery, which seems to have dawned on intellectuals across much of the social sciences. Jameson (1984) is only the most obvious theoretician to whom one could point. But yet again it is important to make distinctions. Although it emerged at the same period, the argument of the postmodernists about the importance of space and place is distinct, in its roots and in its nature, from the debate in geography which led to 'geography matters' and 'the difference that space makes'.

For one thing, and most trivially, gratifying as it is to geographers, perhaps, to have the dimension which they have always treated as their own now accorded such centrality, it has to be said that some of the claims being made in the postmodern literature about the current importance of the spatial are grandly unsubstantiated. But, more significantly, the claim made in the debate about postmodernity is a historically specific one: it is that space and place are important now, and that this is something new. The arguments being made in the debate about 'geography matters' were rather different. They also involved a distinct, and I believe more constructive, engagement with and development of the form of Marxism which had been dominant in the previous decade. Here, the argument was not an empirical one in the sense that it was saying that the world had changed. More, it was an argument about our intellectual focus and about the complexity of the causal processes which we should recognise. This is not incompatible with the argument that space and place have great and real significance in these times, nor that this significance may be increasing, but it is not the same argument.

Localities, reaction, and progressiveness

A wider argument has, however, been made by Harvey in the context of the debate over The Condition of Postmodernity. This argument is that a focus on place and the local is, by its very nature, antiprogressive. It is necessary to be clear here. Harvey is not saying that all foci on localities are necessarily reactionary; nor certainly am I saying that a focus on the local is necessarily progressive (far from it!), and even more certainly I am not saying that it is any more than one among many potential ways of studying for geographers (for a further development of this argument see Massey, 1990). So, in broad terms we probably agree. Nonetheless, Harvey's argument is interesting and important to consider.

There are two interweaving strands. The first begins from the philosophical arguments of such as Heidegger and Bachelard that whereas Time connotes Becoming (which is assumed, in modernist terms, to be progressive), Space connotes Being. And this in turn implies fixity, stasis. The second thread is that a concern with place leads inexorably to an aesthetic mode, and that in turn virtually inevitably to
reaction. Both of these lines of argument are interesting. But they both also have weaknesses. First, both of them involve internal slippages and leaps of logic. Second, both singly and together they imply a concept of 'locality' which is certainly not the only one available and, I would argue, is at odds with the one which is implied by at least some locality studies.

The first argument, then, equates Space with Being; "space contains compressed time. That is what space is for" (Harvey, 1989, page 217). The implication, immediately, is that spaces, such as localities, are essentially simultaneities. Moreover, and more importantly, they are static.

"Being suffused with immemorial spatial memory, transcends Becoming ... . Is this the foundation for collective memory, for all those manifestations of place-bound nostalgias that infect our images of the country and the city, of region, milieu, and locality ... . And if it is true that time is always memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space ... " (page 218).

This notion is closely tied to what Harvey sees as important dilemmas, most particularly for capital ... "the most serious dilemma of all: the fact that space can be conquered only through the production of space" (page 258). When placed in the context of capital accumulation this leads, of course, to the crucial contradiction of 'the spatial fix', and Harvey is here essentially generalising that concept to a wider field. But there are real difficulties in such an attempt at generalisation. The problem with the idea of spatial fix is that it really is about fixity, about immobility. The spatial fix is the physical forms of buildings and infrastructure; it is the prison-house of capital tied up. But this imagery is not transferable to wider fields nor, in particular, to localities. There is clearly a tension between trying on the one hand to capture a synchronicity and attempting to follow a process on the other. But localities, as I see them, are not just about physical buildings, nor even about capital momentarily imprisoned; they are about the intersection of social activities and social relations and, crucially, activities and relations which are necessarily, by definition, dynamic, changing. There is no stable moment, in the sense of stasis, if we define our world, or our localities, ab initio in terms of change.

The CURS programme has 'Change' in the first word of its title. As was argued in the opening section of this paper, its empirical focus was precisely on the quite contrasting ways in which local sets of social relations were being transformed: how they were 'becoming'. It is an accepted argument that capital is not a thing, it is a process. Maybe it ought to be more clearly established that places can be conceptualised as processes, too.\(^3\) If that were so, then it would be possible not only to agree that "the present is valid only by virtue of the potentialities of the future" (Poggioli, 1968, page 73, cited in Harvey, 1989, page 359), but to apply it to localities as well.

The second thread of Harvey's argument is that place inexorably brings with it aesthetics and, in its turn, political reaction. One starting point for the staking out of this position is the close connection made between place and identity. The next step is to endow both place and identity with some kind of seamless coherence. A sense of identity is needed because of the unsettling flux of modern times (more on this later); a sense of identity means something stable, coherent, uncontradictory; places have already been identified as means of constructing identities, hence places

\(^3\) Pred (1984; 1989) has of course for a time argued something along those lines, although from a rather different perspective. Perhaps ironically given the context of the present paper, I would argue that he greatly overemphasises the significance of 'the local' (see Massey, 1990).
are coherent, uncontradictory ... a characterisation which is of course further reinforced by—indeed is integral to—the attribution of stasis already discussed.

Now, there are a number of comments to be made at this point in the argument. First, this is certainly one way in which the notion of 'place' is commonly used, and I would agree with Harvey that it has potential dangers (see below). The problem is that Harvey seems to elide this version of the concept 'place' with any and every notion of locality and the local. Second, this way of thinking of identity is curiously solid in an age of recognition of the decentred subject and of multiple identities. Individuals' identities are not aligned with either place or class; they are probably constructed out of both, as well as a whole complex of other things, most especially race and gender. The balance between these constituents, and the particular characteristics drawn upon in any one encounter or in any one period, may of course vary. And, third, this applies to places too. They do not have single, pregiven, identities in that sense. For places, certainly when conceptualised as localities, are of course not internally uncontradictory. Given that they are constructed out of the juxtaposition, the intersection, the articulation, of multiple social relations they could hardly be so. They are frequently riven with internal tensions and conflicts. Places are shared spaces: you could not think about London's Docklands at the moment without precisely that conflictual sharing and the conflict between interests and views of what the area is, and what it ought to become. This is not an idiosyncratic view, although there is horrendous terminological confusion. Thrift (1983), for instance, writes that "the region, initially, at least, must not be seen as a place; that is a matter for investigation. Rather, it must be seen as made up of a number of different but connected settings for interaction". In the argument in the present paper the term 'locality' could be substituted for 'region' in this quotation. Moreover, if the term 'place' is to have the extra endowment of meaningfulness implied in that quotation, then it must be understood (as Thrift makes clear) as different from other spatial terms, including locality. Chouinard (1989) argues that localities are not bounded areas but spaces of interaction. Sayer (undated) points out that spatial juxtaposition may mean that localities contain many quite unrelated elements:

"Yet, despite this lack of functional integrity, they may still be distinctive and even derive their identity from the lack of unity ... . The awkward aspect of this property of localities is that people can actually be shaped by factors which, among themselves, are totally unrelated" (page 3).

Precisely, and to misquote a current lager advert, "only spatial juxtaposition can do this!" (although, of course—just in case I should be misunderstood—only by virtue of the social phenomena thus juxtaposed).

Moreover, this crucial aspect of internal differentiation, of articulation, and of potential contradiction and conflict applies even more strongly when analysis turns to how actors actively draw upon localities as a basis for interpretation. Wright (1985) has written of the variety of meanings and interpretations of Hackney, many of them implicitly if not always overtly, though indeed sometimes quite actively, in conflict with each other. For each the 'meaning' of Hackney is distinct—for the old white working class, for the variety of ethnic minorities, for the new monied gentrifiers. Each has its view of what the essential place is, each partly based on the past, each drawing out a different potential future. For the analyst of the locality this intersection is surely precisely one of the things which must be addressed. Hackney is Hackney only because of the coexistence of all those different interpretations of what it is and what it might be. There are, of course, many definitions of locality in the literature at the moment, but, given the argument in this paper, it would seem that any requirement that an intersection of social
relations in a particular space can only graduate to locality status if there is a shared local consciousness is inordinately (and arbitrarily) restrictive (and also potentially more open to the arguments about reaction put by Harvey—see below). McArthur (1989), in contrast, argues strongly that any local consciousness, should it exist, will anyway be likely to vary widely in degree and nature between different groups in an area.

All of this relates strongly back to deeper issues of conceptualisation. Perhaps localities may be conceptualised as, in one aspect at least, the intersection of sets of (Giddens-type) locales. But, whatever else they are, localities are constructions out of the intersections and interactions of concrete social relations and social processes in a situation of copresence. Whether that copresence matters, and whether it leads to new emergent powers, is an open question which will not have an empirically generalisable answer. Moreover, the particular social relations and social processes used to define a locality will reflect the research issue (which in turn means that any locality so defined will not be the relevant spatial area for the investigation of all and every social process deemed in some way to have a local level of variation or operation). But all this does mean that localities are not simply spatial areas you can easily draw a line around. They will be defined in terms of the sets of social relations or processes in question. Crucially, too, they are about interaction. Such interaction, moreover, is likely to include conflict. Localities will ‘contain’ (indeed in part will be constituted by) difference and conflict. They may also include interaction between social phenomena which may not be ‘related’ in any immediate way in terms of social relations aspatially. It may be only the fact of copresence which makes them have quite direct impacts upon each other. Moreover, the constellations of interactions will vary over time in their geographical form (see Massey, 1984a, pages 123, 196, 299). And the definition of any particular locality will therefore reflect the question at issue.

But all this returns us to the very originating view of Space-as-Being which Harvey adopts. This definition, and its counterposition with the equation Time–Becoming, is a curious mode of argument for him to follow. In most of the other major conceptualisations in the book there is a dynamic tension, sometimes a constructive contradiction. The initiating and powerful definition of modernism, which forms the framework for much of the argument in the book, is precisely of this nature. So why at this point relapse into this simple static dichotomy? Heidegger’s is not the only approach to space which could have been adopted, and indeed in other parts of his argument (see below) Harvey is clearly critical of Heidegger precisely for his potentially romantic/reactionary views.

Indeed, the next steps in Harvey’s argument are that “The assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition” (1989, page 303) and that such place-relating structures of feeling and action are (almost—it varies) always reactionary “Geographical and aesthetic interventions always seem to imply nationalist, and hence unavoidably reactionary, politics” (pages 282–283). Now, it has already been argued that the concept of locality is not, or need not be, the same as Harvey’s concept of place in his argument here. So many points of potential disagreement between the lines of argument may simply evaporate if clear distinctions are made. Nonetheless, there are wider issues to consider. Harvey exemplifies his logic of place ⇒ aestheticisation ⇒ reaction at a number of points in his book, and the examples he gives, of reactionary nationalism, most obviously of Nazism, or even the urban designs of Sitte, are very telling. But it is never quite clear just how necessary this chain of connections is supposed to be. Thus, of Sitte he writes
“Under conditions of mass unemployment, the collapse of spatial barriers, and the subsequent vulnerability of place and community to space and capital, it was all too easy to play upon sentiments of the most fanatical localism and nationalism. I am not even indirectly blaming Sitte or his ideas for this history. But I do think it important to recognize the potential connection between projects to shape space and encourage spatial practices of the sort that Sitte advocated, and political projects that can be at best conserving and at worst downright reactionary in their implications. These were, after all, the sorts of sentiments of place, Being, and community that brought Heidegger into the embrace of national socialism” (1989, page 277).

Yet if a reactionary outcome is not inevitable, but only a likely danger, still almost no examples of progressive possibilities are given by Harvey (Nicaragua gets a mention). But ‘tradition’ and an awareness of history can also be strengthening in an oppositional sense. Just within the United Kingdom, examples from the Little Moscows to Red Clydeside, Poplar, Clay Cross, and the ‘Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’, show how local bases and traditions can be used. (The last of these was the name accredited to that part of the country for its attempts to combat national policies, most particularly over public transport!). It does not always only work for capital; we have our own traditions, too, and they are not simply to be sentimentalised, they are also to be built on. Moreover, building on traditions can also mean being critical of them. The labour-movement tradition of Sheffield, for instance, has been a strength in many ways, a resource to be drawn upon; but it has also delivered an understanding of gender relations and of the meanings of masculinity and femininity, which have had to be challenged head on for there to be any chance of maintaining a contemporary radical political culture in the local area. Localities, in that sense, are part of the conditions not of our own making. There are, of course, dangers even here. Even labour-movement history can be commodified, commercialised, romanticised, and sold off. Yes, it can, and it often is. But the consistency with which Harvey points to this kind of outcome (in the case of local history, in the case of local economic strategies, in relation to attempts to create spaces and places to celebrate the French revolution), indicates a wider problem. This is that, in Harvey’s account, capital always wins and, it seems, only capital can ever win. Thus, in the discussions of locally based economic strategies most of the discussion is of capitalist strategies (trying to attract private capital, creating competitive images, etc, etc), and where ‘municipal socialism’ is referred to it is labelled “defensive” (page 302) without any further explanation.

Moreover, if as I have argued there are indeed multiple meanings of places, held by different social groups for instance, then the question of which identity is dominant will be the result of social negotiation and conflict. In Wright’s account of Hackney the different social groups had distinct interpretations, not just of Hackney’s present, but also of its past, its ‘traditions’. The past is no more authentic than the present; there will be no one reading of it. And ‘traditions’ are frequently invented or, if they are not, the question of which traditions will predominate can not be answered in advance. It is people, not places in themselves, which are reactionary or progressive. Unless, then, any notion of the past, any consciousness of any tradition, is ipso facto reactionary, the reactionary meaning of places focused on by Harvey is itself a result of conflict and not in principle necessary. Moreover, that means it must be opposed; it cannot simply be ignored.

Harvey writes “‘Regional resistances’, the struggles for local autonomy, place-bound organization, may be excellent bases for political action, but they cannot bear the burden of radical historical change alone” (page 303). This is certainly
The point of this paper has in no way been to glorify the local level, either as object of analysis or as arena of political action. There are great dangers in an overemphasis on its importance, its significance to 'daily life', its relation to the constitution of identity (Massey, 1990). Nor is the issue whether we only do locality studies or only do something else. One of the problems with the current
debate is that it has been understood by some as being about a new ‘orthodoxy’ on what geographers ought to be studying. By others, with equally little understanding, it has been dismissed as a fashion. Both of these positions are crippled by thinking of the development of foci of study as happening entirely as a product of events in the academic world or intellectual debate. But things are not (or should not be) so.

Other explanations of the current focus on localities do set the shifts in a wider, and historically specific, context. Thus Harvey, who is addressing a much wider issue than simply the current locality studies, interprets an increasing focus on place as deriving from the unsettling nature of the times in which we live, the current perturbations being a result of a heightened process of time-space compression. There are many paragraphs evoking the ephemerality, confusion, uncertainty, the shifting and the fragmentation, the disruption. “In periods of confusion and uncertainty, the turn to aesthetics (of whatever form) becomes more pronounced” (page 328). Apart from the serious question of how one can begin to evaluate such a claim, there is a further point. If people are beginning to turn to localities in reactionary ways, then it may precisely be important to study them. Such phenomena are themselves—or should be—ausable to historical materialist analysis. To study something is not necessarily to glorify it; indeed it can be an important part of exposing myths, of locality and place as much as of anything else.

But I also find mystifying the idea, argued by many, that time-space compression is somehow psychologically disturbing. Such flux and disruption is, as Harvey says, part of modernity. Why should the construction of places out of things from everywhere be so unsettling? Who is it who is yearning after the seamless whole and the settled place? A global sense of place—dynamic and internally contradictory and extra-verted—is surely potentially progressive.

Nonetheless, it is true that the current programme of locality studies was proposed for reasons which were historically specific. They arose from the situation then and there. And moreover that situation was not one only, nor even primarily, defined by academic or intellectual debate. It was a situation defined by what was happening in society more widely, and by important questions which were raised as a result of those changes. Such a history, in other words, does not imply that locality research, the study of particular places, should in some more general sense, always and everywhere, be the focus of human geographical enquiry. Sometimes we may want to study particular localities for particular, strategic, reasons. Most often, indeed, we may find that other foci of research will be more important.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks, for helpful comments and discussion, to John Allen, Linda McDowell, Andrew Sayer, and the editors of this collection of papers.

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