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Social Imaginaries of Space: Concepts and Cases

Edited by Bernard Debardieux

Edward Elgar, 2019

The author of *Social Imaginaries of Space: Concepts and Cases* (original: “L’espace de l’Imaginaire: Essais et detours”), Bernard Debardieux, is a Professor of Political and Cultural Geography at the University of Geneva. Earlier work written with Gilles Rudaz (Debardieux & Rudaz, 2015) is an historically rich account of the geographical imagination and socially constructed nature of mountains. It was translated from French by Jane Marie Todd and published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015. His recent *Social Imaginaries of Space*, the subject of this review, is published by Edward Elgar as part of its New Horizons in Human Geography series. The book is translated by Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, who recently translated into English Simone de Beauvoir’s (2011) *Le Deuxième Sexe*. The work is divided into 11 chapters, including four “concept” chapters (in the original, *essais*), six “case” chapters (*detours*), an opening discussion (“Framing the spatial dimension of social imaginaries”), and a conclusion in the form of an “Epiphany.”

Much has been written and said in the field of human geography (among other disciplines) about imaginaries and imaginations (most notably, of course, are works by Edward Said, 1995 [1978], David Harvey, 2009 [1973], Doreen Massey (1999), and Derek Gregory, 1994, whose name, among other relevant geographers, is curiously absent in the book). Text on the back cover “proposes ... a theory on how space is intrinsically linked to the making of societies.” This statement will not surprise many geographers, as many works have been and continue to be written on the subject (see, for example, Jo Sharp’s (2011) work on subaltern imaginations). The actual contents of the book are less theoretical and more focused on providing readers with an “invitation” (p.12) to engage with several examples and case studies of social imaginaries of space. Before exploring these, which Debardieux does in various levels of detail in the book’s “cases”

and “concepts” chapters, the book starts with a discussion on the work’s conceptual “framing”.

In these early pages, covering the space of the first chapter, Debardieux outlines the imaginary as the “very condition of [society’s] existence ... the imaginary pertains to the institution of a society and therefore frames those social institutions that organise its functioning” (p.4). He distinguishes imaginary from imagination “partially” on a linguistic basis and writes that the “two terms have functioned as lexical attractors, the latter within the Francophone and the former within the Anglophone community” (p.3). The term imaginary is for that reason more prominently used than imagination. For Debardieux, it refers to a collective societal understanding of the spaces of the world. In more concrete terms, perhaps, this means that he is not so much interested in the “geographic imaginary” or the “historical imaginary,” because such “qualifiers do not designate collectives” (p.4), as much as he is interested in the “imaginary of space”, the “imaginary of nature”. Drawing on Charles Taylor’s (2004) *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and also Benedict Anderson’s (2006) *Imagined Communities* among others, Debardieux explains that the social imaginary refers to “the framework or matrix that gives a collective orientation to all of the social practices and their related significations” (p.3). He explains that the social imaginary is “the very condition of [a society’s] institutionalisation” (p.4).

Debardieux explains that space is “constitutive of modern social imaginaries” (p.1). His explanation of the “spatial dimension”, building on insights from a somewhat eclectic range of authors (Hannah Arendt, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Said, and others), is referred to as a “condition of possibility” for the making of a social imaginary (p.10). Despite stating that the book “takes its own route” (p.8), Debardieux does not explain the ways in which his conceptualisation is necessarily different from

those in the already existing rich accounts by Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1989), and others. What we are left with, instead, is a rather loose commitment to the idea that every community, regardless of its size, must imagine itself spatially as a community. Few geographers would disagree with that proposition; more, however, would question the novelty of such a premise.

The six cases, but also the book's many more examples and case studies, range from the Arab Spring, to Little Italy in New York, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) photos of Earthrise, and beyond. They serve as reminders that social imaginaries unfold in and are constitutive of a large variety of different scales (the neighbourhood, the city, the state, and indeed, the globe). The first example, which is not presented as a "case" but nevertheless is explored in great depth, covers the social imaginaries associated with and constitutive of the "football game as an institution" (p.14). Debardieux uses the example of football to illustrate how social practices (rules) and their signification (emotions, affects) are determined by their spatial context (the football pitch, the goalpost, and the stadium). Only a few pages later our attention is moved to the "spatiality of the public sphere" at the time of the well-known demonstrations and protests in Tiananmen Square, Tahrir Square, Madrid, and elsewhere. The multiplicity of these and other protests, heterogeneous in their makeup and demands, and diverse in their spatial strategies and uses of space, appears merged and conflated to facilitate a comparison with the spatial practices and social imagines associated with a football match. The next page is dedicated to "the imaginary of the city" and the one thereafter focuses on "geographical categorisation." (pp.26, 27). The speed with which topics, concepts, and ideas are discussed, admittedly, left me feeling a bit confused about the author's intentions.

The institution, social imaginary, and spaces of the state receive special attention in the book. Concept chapter 2, which is among the longest, is entitled "state imaginary of territory". The first half draws on Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Moore's *Utopia* to make the argument that they are "not only illustrative, but also founding, each in its own way, of a new territorial conception of the modern state" (p.40). Those familiar with Elden's (2013) *Birth of Territory* will question the historical accuracy and novelty of this argument, especially considering that the chapter does not offer insights not already discussed by Elden and others. Statements such as "maps represent and operationalise state territoriality" (p.52) will not cause surprise among geographers or cartographers. The idea, moreover, that "obstacle-walls at the edges of states ... have been given up in the modern period" (p.54) might not persuade those familiar with the unprecedented

number of walls that currently are being built around the world. Key literature on the border, maps, and walls seems to have been ignored in this chapter (especially writings by Étienne Balibar, Wendy Brown, and Brian Harley).

Empirical explorations into the "state imaginary", which were introduced conceptually in the preceding section, are found in Chapters 5 and 6, entitled: "Case 2: England at the time of the Tudors and Stuarts, of the self-representation of the modern state" and "Case 3: Science and State Imaginary in Colonial Indochina". The Indochina chapter includes references to fertile work by James Scott and Willem van Schendel, but also alerts readers, albeit maybe too fleetingly, to Indigenous conceptualisations of territory. The history and politics of the term "Indochina", a postcolonial French category, unfortunately remain unexplored. The two chapters rely predominantly, if not exclusively, on secondary literature whilst many of the images appear borrowed from websites (British Library and Wikipedia).

The remainder of the book explores imaginaries both "national" (Chapters 7 and 8) and "post-national" (Chapters 9 to 11). The national imaginary is analysed through signature architectures (the *Pantheon* and the *Lycée Henri-IV* in Paris), public spaces (train stations, post offices), the concept of the "capital city", the 2015 Charlie demonstrations, and places of remembrance (Ground Zero) among others. It must be said that many of these representations, materialities, and conceptions of space are situated in familiar places in the West. They appear, moreover, to consolidate the idea of a specific state imaginary. It would have been interesting, perhaps, also to look at places that undermine the myth of a coherent national singularity and, consequently, obstruct and challenge the process of the "naturalisation of the nation" (p.124). Where in the French national imagination, for instances, are the banlieue? How does race feature in the experience of a visit to the Pantheon, or a train station? Debardieux articulates scepticism of the idea "that the Pantheon and its ceremonies strike all French people in the same way" but, in the same sentence, expresses unfamiliarity "of any study or research on this subject" (p.116).

A different kind of engagement with the large and growing body of postcolonial geography, see for instance Kipfer (2011), also would have helped in balancing the last three chapters on "post-national political imaginaries of space"—one conceptual, the other two "cases". Theoretical discussions in these chapters, which, like the others preceding them, felt quite broad in scope, moved from the "right to be stateless", to "de-statisation" globalisation, and "re-localisation". The implicit and explicit emphasis on capitalist globalisation and liberal values as

forces that do not leave “any corner of the planet free of ... influences and manifestations” appears dated in the present climate of illiberal nativism and authoritarian capitalism. The last two chapters of this post-national segment of the book include a short but creative examination of Chinese-Italian spatial relations in New York City (Chapter 10) and a somewhat cramped analysis relying especially on Dennis Cosgrove’s fertile work about “post-national imaginaries of nature”.

Debardieux acknowledges in the concluding “Epiphany” that the book’s “goal was enormous” (p.178). The objective he explains, was to “to take measure of the spatial dimension constitutive of social imaginaries in a long-term perspective” (p.178). Writing in such broad brushstrokes, however, raises questions about the theoretical links, historical relationships, and/or empirical commonalities between a football stadium in Marseille, Chinatown in New York, and a Hans Holbein painting from the first half of the 16th century. All of the book’s case studies are in themselves interesting examples of the ways in which space plays a crucial role in the (re)producing of social imaginaries, as shown also by the vast literature on specific places that relate to larger national, state, and even planetary imaginaries (e.g., Anderson 1987; Wu 2005). Yet a more targeted and smaller number of examples could have helped Debardieux to direct and manage this book’s (maybe too) enormous undertaking. Having said that, however, the many examples will provide readers, especially students, with an overview before moving on to more specific literatures.

A final, yet important, point to consider relates to the translation of the book. It is difficult to assess the quality of a translation without having seen or read the original. I must admit, however, that the phrasing appeared unnecessarily confusing and cumbersome at times. It seemed, to me at least, that the original French syntax had been imported directly into English. This approach meant that I felt sometimes forced to reread carefully, sometimes more than twice, many of the needlessly long sentences. The chosen translation technique of direct importation, but also decisions over punctuation and the numerous sub-headings, sometimes appearing long and

clunky (see “World Circulation of the Bioregional Model as an Objective in Itself”, p.175), broke and obstructed the flow of the already dense discussion.

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