

Representations of place

What can human geographers learn from the different ways in which places are depicted?

What do we mean by representation?

Representation refers to the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. As geographers we learn about places through different representations: through the images that we see, through reading both fiction and non-fiction, through maps, newspapers, media reports, television, films, paintings and so on.

Some representations of place are attempting to communicate something specific about a place or to challenge our view of a place. Examples of these would be an advert for a holiday destination or a place marketing campaign. Most of us, however, learn about places through a broader set of representations.



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Liverpool

Even if you have never been to Liverpool you will still 'know' about that city. Most people will be able to identify the city from its skyline or waterfront — the Liver Building and the other great buildings that make up what is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. This architecture represents Liverpool's affluent past — a time when the wealth of Liverpool exceeded that of London (in part due to its participation in the Atlantic slave trade).

Musical associations

Photographs of the Liverpool skyline often include a ferry. This again represents Liverpool's past, particularly the role of musicians in creating a representation of the city in the 1960s. At that time, many people across the world felt that they knew the city, especially places like Penny Lane, a suburban street in Liverpool made famous by a Beatles song.

Changing images

Inevitably, representations of places change over time. In July 1981, riots in Toxteth, an inner-city area of Liverpool, dominated the news. Liverpool was represented as a city that was dangerous and volatile. That summer, riots in other areas such as Brixton (London), Handsworth (Birmingham) and Chapeltown (Leeds) resulted in inner cities being represented as 'disordered landscapes' where young people were uncontrollable and living in 'concrete jungles'.

These representations suggested that the inner city was a 'no-go' area inhabited by an 'animalised' population who threatened the residents in the suburbs. They implied that it was the people who lived in the inner cities who were the 'problem' rather than focusing on the high levels of deprivation that triggered the riots in the first place.

The full picture

We can see how song lyrics, media representations, television programmes and films create different representations of place. All of these contribute to our ways of knowing the city — even if they are not 'accurate' representations of the place.

As geographers, we try to make sense of this complex set of information. Of course, when we analyse representations, we need to look for what is absent as well as what is present. We also need to consider the implications of the way places and people are represented and the ways in which those representations have significance.

Activity

Consider how your local region or city is represented. Think about what those representations might tell you about the place.

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