

# Understanding our place in the world

The study of place is a core part of A-level human geography. This column considers what place means today, through the work of an influential British geographer who died this year, Doreen Massey

Place is one of those elemental aspects of life. We're all born somewhere, raised somewhere, educated somewhere, and so on. The places where we live help define who we are (our identity), our levels of wellbeing (physical and mental) and our opportunities over our life-course (economic, cultural, environmental and so on).

Places vary: their composition is never exactly the same, and the differences often are significant. To take some obvious examples, Shanghai, Sydney, St Petersburg and Seattle may all be coastal cities but their layout, populations, transportation systems, government institutions and so on are relatively unique.

Geographers are deeply interested in understanding places: they explore the how and why of where. Such understanding is an important part of geography A-level. In this Geographical Ideas column, I discuss how best to understand places in an increasingly interconnected world. I do so by highlighting the writings of British geographer Doreen Massey. Massey's way of thinking about place has been hugely influential. It helps us understand our own places as well as those that other people inhabit.

## Changing places

Massey, born in the 1940s, witnessed enormous worldwide geographical changes during her lifetime, which, sadly, ended in early 2016. She recognised that the very nature of places was changing. Traditionally places have been thought of as distinct points on the Earth's surface. According to this traditional view, the character of a place is formed by a combination of local physical geography and the activities of those people who live there. We might call this an *internalist* perspective

because it distinguishes one place from another, situating places in larger geographical entities like the administrative regions and nation states which overlie them. For geographers, this view encouraged in-depth study of places at a local scale, bracketing-out other places and larger geographical scales. Such study was called *idiography*.

However, by the 1970s the internalist view was starting to look out of date. For instance, the large increase in world oil prices in 1973 sent shock waves through places around the globe whose economies depended on affordable oil imports from overseas. In this context, Massey sought to provide a new vocabulary to help us analyse places on an ever 'shrinking planet' where jet planes, container ships, automobiles, television, mobile phones and the internet were connecting people like never before.

## A global sense of the local

In the 1980s Massey published several essays that inspired geographers to reconceptualise places and rethink how they conduct research on places. One appeared in a politically radical magazine called *Marxism Today* (Massey 1991). Others appeared in academic journals and books — such as a chapter entitled 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place' (Massey 1993). Rather than quote from these line-by-line let me identify some of Massey's key arguments.

## A relational view

First, while they are still distinct points on the Earth surface situated within larger geographical units, Massey insisted that places are increasingly porous. She advocated a *relational* understanding of place. In other words, the absolute qualities of place — that



A leading theorist of place: geographer Doreen Massey (1944–2016)

is, the specific things that make Shanghai, Sydney, St Petersburg and Seattle different from each other — are, Massey argued, increasingly conditioned by events, decisions and institutions in other places both near and far. The 'inside' and 'outside' of places are increasingly interfused. This interconnectivity of places is captured in the now well-known concept of 'globalisation'. When Massey was first writing globalisation was still a novel term.

## Difference and interconnectedness

Second, as a geographer Massey was critical of those outside the discipline who suggested that the world was increasingly 'placeless'. The spread of McDonald's fast-food outlets was, for some analysts, a sure sign that Western-style 'modernisation' was an unstoppable force worldwide.

But Massey argued that the reality was different. Though many places look and feel the same, a great many do not. She argued for a 'global sense of place' in which we see change to the specificity of places as driven by a combination of internal and external factors. Such a combination could produce continued diversity and unevenness amid intense place interaction. It does not produce homogeneity. For instance, cities like Oxford and Jakarta are both 'hard-wired' to other places close and far away. But they retain their geographical distinctiveness, reflecting their historical evolution prior to the era of globalisation.

## Uneven interdependency

Third, Massey's focus on place interrelationships led her to propose the notion of 'uneven interdependency'. Interdependence means that one place relies, in significant measure, on a constant flow of people, goods, finance and/or information from elsewhere. For

## Further reading

Featherstone, D. (2016) 'Doreen Massey: an obituary', *Guardian* 27 March: [www.tinyurl.com/j2m8a5b](http://www.tinyurl.com/j2m8a5b)

Massey, D. (1991) 'A global sense of place', *Marxism Today* Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 24–29.

Massey, D. (1993) 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place', in J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner (eds) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, pp. 59–69, Routledge.

instance, in recent years many mining towns in Australia have relied heavily on demand for coal from China. If the Chinese economy slows down then these towns will rapidly need to find alternative markets or risk growth in unemployment and declines in revenue. Here, then, different networks of places form a metaphorical body, each being a vital organ without which the network shrinks or dies.

## Power geometry

Fourth, related to this, Massey proposed the concept of 'power geometry'. Some places, she argued, contain resources, people and institutions that allow them to exert a large influence nationally or internationally, beyond the local. Like the lines on a geometric drawing, this influence radiates out to places that cannot always exert reciprocal influence.

Connected to this, Massey noted that only some people on the planet are able to move freely between places, while others are 'trapped' in often inhospitable locations (such as parts of war-torn Syria today). Indeed, even within a single place there are areas and people whose lives are impacted by far-distant events, while others in the same place are relatively insulated by virtue of their wealth and social networks.

Likewise, even in the seemingly 'worst' places on Earth, there are those who find ways and means to stay, even as others are forced to migrate in search of new places to make a life, often at great personal cost (as we have recently seen in the case of people fleeing north Africa for southern Europe and drowning in the Mediterranean en route).

## De-nationalisation of place

Finally, for Massey all this points to a key geographical message: we can no longer assume that places in the same country are somehow more closely related and mutually dependent than places that are separated by international borders. Consider London. Its wealthiest neighbourhoods contain many people whose money comes from, and is invested in, a range of other places across the world (such as Beijing

and Caracas). In this sense many places, or parts of places, have become 'de-nationalised' and are relatively decoupled from places physically close to them.

## Time-space compression

We can phrase Massey's arguments in relation to the well-known concept of another influential geographer, David Harvey (who is a professor in New York). Harvey coined the term 'time-space compression'. It is effectively another way of referring to globalisation. It describes the 'death of distance' between far-flung places (thanks to transportation and communication infrastructures) and the reduced time it takes events in one place to reverberate through others. (An example is the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.)

In Massey's terms, not all places contribute to time-space compression equally, nor do their residents experience equal benefits or dis-benefits from such compression. For her, the world is an exceedingly complex network of places whose relative location, power and vulnerability to external shocks is changing over time.

## Researching places

For geographers wanting to conduct research on various places, what do Massey's ideas mean? First, they mean we should examine how external and internal factors interact to create stability and change in places. These factors can be

- **demographic** (e.g. in-migration, out-migration or daily commuting)
- **economic** (e.g. new corporate investments in manufacturing, or central government grants and subsidies)
- **political** (e.g. the BBC, a public institution, deciding to move part of its operations to Salford near Manchester in 2012)
- **cultural** (e.g. new cuisine entering the local restaurant or fast-food market) and so on.

Second, Massey alerts us to the varied experiences of place within any locality.



How can we use Massey's ideas to understand the identity of a place, for example Seattle?

For instance, the experience of being a non-Muslim woman in Tehran is very different from that of being a Muslim woman walking the streets of Berlin. People's perceptions of neighbourhoods, shopping areas, eateries and so on are affected by how these micro-spaces accommodate them (or fail to, depending).

Third, Massey's ideas have us looking at how powerful actors in a place try to position their locality relative to others. Place marketing is one of many examples of this, where a new image is seen as a way of differentiating a locality and drawing in new people and investment. Such images can 'reframe' the realities of a place, giving people new lenses through which to see the world.

Finally, Massey's ideas point us towards those who are disadvantaged by, or largely left out of, the 'stretched out' interdependencies that benefit others in a particular place. How they do live day to day? What does their place mean to them? How do they regard others living nearby, but whose circumstances may be very different?

## Building on Massey's legacy

Since Massey wrote about place, places have continued to change. One interesting development is the emergence of 'virtual geographies' where people get to inhabit *non-physical* places online or within a game system. For many people these 'electronic places' are likely to become more important in the years to come, allowing them to play roles and become someone else, even as their daily place-based lives continue as normal. Developments like these can be added to the sorts of things Massey's ideas direct us to study. Places today are increasingly physical and virtual, real and imagined, local and global. Investigating them is among the most rewarding things a geographer can do.

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