

Is the world getting larger or smaller?

By Doreen Massey,
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It is hard to escape the grand statements: the world is getting smaller; we live in a global village; speed-up has conquered distance; time, finally, has annihilated space. We read of the death of distance, and that geography too is dead. (But then we are subjected, also, to assertions of the "end of history").

Olympian claims about "eras", shifts between great periods of history, are always a bit dubious, not least in their universalising pretensions. But recent changes do raise new questions.

One of the more thoughtful formulations about this supposedly shrinking world has been put forward by Zygmunt Bauman (see "[Time and space reunited](#) [1]", *Time and Society*, 9/2-3, 2000). He has argued that there has been a shift from what he calls "heavy modernity" to "light modernity". Heavy modernity is territorialising and preoccupied with size. Light modernity is all about flow and movement; it is fleet of foot. "It all changed", he argues "with the advent of software capitalism and light modernity". And, he continues: "The change in question is the new irrelevance of space ... space counts little, or does not count at all".

But what does it mean to "count"? For [Bauman](#) [1] here, things count if they are valued, in proportion to the cost of their acquisition. Since it is so easy now to travel, space does not count for much at all. "If you know that you can visit a place at any time you wish ... since all parts of space can be reached in the same time-span (that is, 'no-time'), no part of space is privileged, none has a special value". Bauman here is capturing something important: that dismal flattening of the planet into places to visit ("where shall we go this year?" "I've heard Mongolia is nice").

Doreen Massey is professor of geography at the Open University. She is co-founder & co-editor of *[Soundings: a journal of politics and culture](#)* [2]. Among her books are *For Space* ([Sage, 2005](#) [3]) and *World City* ([Polity Press](#) [[forthcoming, 2007](#)] [4])

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Bauman's argument, of course, is not entirely right - though not in ways that immediately bring much cheer. It is not true that all places are reachable in the same time-span ("no-time"). There's been a kind of crumpling, a topological scrumpling, of space. New York has been brought closer to London than has Alma Ata, though in miles they are equally far away (or near). Cyberspace, and the instantaneous spaces of finance, each has its internal, unequal, geographies. The centralisation of fast travel through hubs has rendered some places in-between all the harder to get at.

As Dea Birkett [7] wrote of the Pacific (the ocean assumed to be taking over from the Atlantic as the centre of this shrinking world):

"The borders of the world's greatest ocean have been joined as never before. And Boeing has brought these people together. But what about those they fly over, on their islands five miles below? ... Air travel might enable businessmen to buzz across the ocean, but the concurrent decline in shipping has only increased the isolation of many island communities ... Pitcairn, like many other Pacific islands, has never felt so far from its neighbours".

It can feel much the same when the local railway service is cut back. The mobility of some is countered by, and can reinforce, the relative immobility of others - those who are visited but do not visit, those held up at frontiers, those immobilised in place.

The encounter with difference

But it is also more than this. Space does in fact continue to "count", and it does so because space is more than distance, certainly more than the physical distance of miles or kilometres.

If time is the dimension of change and succession, then space is the dimension of simultaneity. It is the dimension of contemporaneous co-existence. It is the dimension of the fact that, as I write this one morning in Kilburn, north London, there is *right now* fighting in the southern Philippines (I will learn about it later), *right now* in southern Africa women's daily struggle for water and life is underway, *right now* in the squatter settlements of the great cities of Latin America poor children are gearing themselves up for another day.

Space is a simultaneity of stories-so-far; it has the dimension of multiplicity. While air travel, and emails, and cyberspace, may certainly - though differentially - reduce the costs and effects of physical distance, these do not in any way abolish multiplicity. A telephone call may be instantaneous, the distance between us may be for a while reduced, but we are not merged into one entity.

Space, then, is the dimension of the social: it presents us with the existence of others (see Doreen Massey, *For Space* [8], 2005). "Visiting" a place, as in Bauman's scenario, is more than just getting there. Visiting is a practice of engagement, an encounter with others. It is in that process of establishing a relation that the "cost" (and the value) can be measured.

Susan Sontag offered the tangential but tantalising reflection at the end of her resonant essay *Trip to Hanoi (1968)* [9] that the world seemed larger to her than when she had arrived.

This is social distance, cultural distance. It connotes those gulfs that can exist in the understanding and the experience of the world. This is the discontinuity, the disruptedness, of space. It happens at all scales. You never know quite what even the person next to you, whom you know so well, is thinking, feeling (a penny for them?). Maurice Blanchot [10] has written of this: that in the very moment of the meeting, a gap, a rupture, remains. How much more this was and is so in the Sontag [11] situation

What does it mean to say you can "get to" the southern Philippines, southern Africa or Latin America in five, ten or fifteen hours? What is it to be "there"? What distances must be crossed? How long might that take? And at what "cost"?

In the thesis of the shrinking world, because "we all" have mobile phones, drink Starbucks coffee, these differences are underplayed. The George W Bush-Tony Blair global project fails to

understand (or refuses to respect) the depth of variation (cultural, economic, political) between the multiple stories whose contemporaneous coexistence makes up our spatially differentiated "now".

As inequalities that this project creates deepen around the world, what is it for Bill Gates, or a middle-class metropolitan from the rich world, to "visit" Mike Davis's [12] planet of slums? If space is about the simultaneity of difference, then it cannot be annihilated by time. Quite the opposite - it poses a challenge: the full recognition of the contemporaneous existence of others. In that, there is still much work to be done.

Indeed, there are many who argue that this is in fact a *spatial* era. Bruno Latour [13], in a proposal for "a philosophical platform for a left European party" (1998), writes [14]: "I have the feeling that we are slowly shifting from an obsession with time to an obsession with space".

This is the curious irony of the "death of geography" thesis. For in fact it is *time* (travel time, communication time) that is being reduced, not space. On the contrary, there is *more* "space" in our lives; the reach of our connectivities and interactions, the geographies of the dependencies and effects even of the most quotidian aspects of our lives (so that no longer can we equate the everyday with the scale of the local), have expanded dramatically. The really serious questions that are raised by speed-up, by "the communications revolution" and by cyberspace are not whether space will be annihilated (it won't) but what kinds of new spatial configurations are being constructed and whether we can face up to the real challenge of space: the encounter with difference.

Evasive imaginations

The truth is that we persistently evade the challenge of space. We adopt, often even without meaning to, alternative imaginations that deflect the reality of multiplicity. Little imaginative manoeuvres that make it easier to live in the world.

The notion of a shrinking world is precisely such a manoeuvre, projected above all in aid of the project of "Davos man": that new global elite [15] of neo-liberal wealth and its cheerleaders, represented by Bill Gates's and Nicholas Negroponte's digital future, and Thomas Friedman's [16] "the world is flat". *Their* world (of business, of virtual communication, of touchdowns in selected technological hotspots in the global south) is presented as *the* world.

In their world distance is always a burden (already, in *Being Digital* [17] [1995], Negroponte was writing of the "limitations" of geography); there is no question of the pleasures of movement or travel. And the aim is to "unearth" us, from any form of embeddedness, indeed from the planet itself. The associated rhetoric of "level playing-fields" and flat earth (yes, the earth is now flat as well as shrinking - soon it will eat itself up into a black hole) eradicates the historical depth of any cultures or histories that are not theirs.

Another such evasive imaginative manoeuvre, with similar effects, is to turn space into time, geography into history. For instance, when faced with questions about the poverty and inequality that exist within today's neo-liberal globalisation (for evidence, see the annual United Nations Development Programme [18] reports), the reply so often comes: do not worry, they are just behind, they will catch up.

The assumption of this form of globalisation is that the whole world is headed along the same path. In such a framing imagination the whole uneven geography of the world is reorganised into a historical queue. Geography (a spatial simultaneity of differences) is turned into history (seen as a single succession). Both space and time suffer here: on the one hand the contemporaneity

of space is obliterated, on the other hand temporality is reduced to the singular. There is *one* historical queue (one model of development, say), and it is defined by those "in the lead" (there is one voice).

An evident result of this manoeuvre is that those supposedly "behind" in this queue have no possibility (no space, precisely) to define a path of their own. Their future is foretold. Maybe they would not *wish* to follow where the "developed" west has led. It is this framing evasive imagination that underpins the assertion that there is no alternative.

Another result is the obscuring of the evident fact that the inequality and poverty in the world are being produced *now*, in part as a structural fact of this form of globalisation [18] (thus making it less likely that a majority of others *can* "catch up"). And in the same manoeuvre this evasive imagination cunningly ignores our own implication within the production of that inequality now.

However, and most relevant to the argument here, this turning of geography into history also reduces - makes more bland and less pressing - the way in which the differences between us are framed (the differences between, say, Davos man [18] and those in the planet of slums, between Susan Sontag and the citizens of Hanoi). That unfathomable difference is reduced to place in the historical queue. The role of culture is reduced to decorative local colour, recruited as part of the inter-place competitive package.

This is an utter denial of the depth and reality of other stories, other trajectories. It is, indeed, a way of imagining that the world is smaller than it is. Moreover, the positioning of the different as somehow in the past denies equal standing; it is a form of belittlement, a denial of what Johannes Fabian (in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* [19] [1983] called "coevalness").

Just to be clear: the argument here is not against *any* notion of "progress" or "development" *tout court*. All the obvious points are real: clean water is better than dirty water, shelter than exposure, education than ignorance. (The problems lie with the singularity of their assumed form, and with who it is that gets to define that form.) The aim here is, rather, to point to the apparent scariness of a real recognition of the spatially differentiated now, and our implication in it, and to point to those little manoeuvres we will adopt, the "political cosmologies" (Johannes Fabian [20], again) that we will conjure to avoid looking at it full in the face.

How exclusion works

A public argument about the "Bushmen [20]" of the central Kalahari desert, modern Botswana, illustrates something of this. In a debate about development in Botswana in March 2006, the British politician Jenny Tonge (a Liberal Democrat, and member of the upper chamber of parliament, the House of Lords) characterised the Gana and Gwi people as living "in the stone age" (see "We need a proper debate about indigenous people [21]", *Guardian*, 24 March 2006). Although this description was mobilised, as it so often is, in defence of a particular mode of development, it is not that that concerns me here. Rather it is the characterisation itself.

"Lady Tonge", reports George Monbiot, "later explained that she used the word primitive to mean belonging to 'another age'." (see George Monbiot, "Who really belongs to another age - bushmen or the House of Lords? [22]", *Guardian*, 21 March 2006). But this is precisely the point. The Gana and the Gwi are - as Tonge later admitted - organising their way of life *today*, right now as you read this piece.

In the subsequent flurry of correspondence, a letter from Jumanda Gakelebhone and Roy Sesane, of the First People of the Kalahari, captured some of the issues:

"We, as the organisation of Bushmen of the Central Kalahari in Botswana, are very offended by comments made by Jenny Tonge ... that we are 'mesolithic', or middle stone age. She says it is not an insult. But if you call someone stone age or primitive, it sounds like you think they are inferior to you. As a matter of fact, we use radios and some of us have mobile phones. But that is not the point. We just want the opportunity to be allowed to choose our lifestyles. We want to go back to our land to be with our ancestors and we want to be allowed to live there in peace by hunting and gathering - not as 'exhibits in a museum', but because it is a very clever way to survive in the desert. Tonge obviously does not respect us enough to think we know how to choose what is best for ourselves." (*Guardian*, letters, 25 March 2006).

Regardless of which "side" you take on the more appropriate form of development (and I am not competent to judge) this mode of denigration by relegation to the past, as opposed to the respect demanded by the recognition of contemporaneous, though different, existence, is a failure to recognise fully the spatiality of the planet.

It happens all the time, and in a multitude of ways. Tony Blair's constant mobilisation of the term "modernisation" in the singular, as if there were no other way of going forward than the one he proposes, and his characterisation of anyone who opposes him as stuck in the past, is another example. It is an assertion that there is only one story to be told, only one history to be made; and it is a refusal to engage in debate with the - evidently existing - alternatives. The world is not getting so small that there is room for only one story.

A final example of this powerful mentality and discourse struck me forcibly at the time when George W Bush was re-elected in 2004, many commentators of a more liberal persuasion were negligent in their characterisation of that base of support that was church-going, family-orientated, anti-feminist, jingoistic, homophobic ... (one could go on). The tendency was to express astonishment, to consign these views to some archaic past (if only); how could they possibly *be* like that in the 21st century?

This is inadequate. First, it is to deny their actually-existing difference; it is in that sense to display a lack of respect. Second, the proper and potentially more fruitful disagreement with these positions is not on grounds of "old-fashionedness" but on grounds that are political. Third, simply dismissing such views as *passé* ignores the forces that have contributed to their production, and thereby deprives us of any political purchase upon them.

A need to look outwards

It could be argued that there is today already much attention paid to difference - too much, in the opinion of some. There is a constant preoccupation with multiculturalism, with the inevitable hybridity of everywhere, and with the supposed dangers of universalisms of all sorts. The processes involved have both liberated and carried their own dangers (of fragmentation, of relativism, of parallel lives).

It is a different point that I want to make, however. For, I would argue, a lot of this attention to difference has been inward-looking - another effective way, as it turns out, of reducing the dimensions of the world. Too often the question of difference, of cultural diversity and of the coexistence of otherness, is approached in terms of the world coming to us.

I could cite a hundred such evocations, but here is just one:

"Cultural diversity is not a phenomenon of exotic and incommensurable others in distant lands and at different stages of historical development, as the old concept of culture

makes it appear. No. It is here and now in every society" (see James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* [23], Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Note the phrase "the different stages of historical development". There is no doubt that cultural diversity, on a myriad of dimensions is, in part and increasingly, internal to individual societies. That is the principal experience of it for those who live in the metropolitan West. But it *is* implacably also, and still, a question of different others in distant lands. It is the same with that oft-used phrase about "the margins invading the centre" (to refer to migration from the majority world). There has of course been movement, but most of "the margins" still live "in distant lands" - the global south is indeed the majority world.

Debates over the politics of our cities are utterly imbued with this inward-lookingness. While attention is paid to the diversity within - and quite rightly so - there is a blithe obliviousness to the wider planet upon which our urban lives depend. The most glaring example in Britain is that of London. It is justly celebrated for its mixity, for its everyday ability to rub along together, for what Paul Gilroy [24] calls its "convivial culture".

In the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 bombs in London [24], everyone - from Ken Livingstone to the *Evening Standard* (and that is quite a distance) to Ben Okri - both celebrated this and insisted that it would continue. It is, indeed, and in spite of the racisms and discriminations that nonetheless continue, a considerable achievement: a real negotiation of place in a globalised world. Ben Okri [25], in Trafalgar Square on the day of remembrance, reworked a poem [26] which contained the lines: "Here lives the great music / of humanity". In this sense, truly, the world is getting smaller.

Yet London is also the place where neo-liberalism began to stir, and from where it is now, in part, organised and disseminated around the planet. It is, precisely, in its global citydom at one end of a host of practices and relations - of finance and investment, and disinvestment, of hedge funds (the big thing now), and of currency dealings which make or break countries and communities in those "distant lands". (At the same time, it is indeed home to many of those who talk to us of shrinking worlds and level playing-fields.)

In the most mundane of ways, London could not survive a day were its relations with those places to be cut off. And yet so many of us, and indeed the politics our cities, live in utter forgetfulness of this, those wider geographies of difference (for a consideration of a potential politics to address this, see Doreen Massey, "London inside-out", *Soundings: a journal of politics and culture* [27], 12 /2006.)

If the world seems to be getting smaller perhaps it is in part because we don't look, or listen, or (precisely) take enough time; or because we focus on the world coming to us at the expense of looking outwards. It is impossible to be aware of all those other stories going on "right now", as we struggle on with our lives. But that is not the point. Rather it is a question of the angle of vision, of a stance in relation to the world, an outward-lookingness of the imagination.

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