

## **Politics and Contextual Contingencies**

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A convincing argument for the possibility of politics in space/time was made by Massey (1993). By conceptualizing time and space as part of a four-dimensional integrated dynamic force, she moves away from the notion of a dichotomy between the static container of space and the causal force of time, and so re-politicizes space. Massey writes from a position of realism. While she does not focus her argument around this ontological position, it remains a fundamental component of her argument. I wish to take a step backwards from Massey's contentions to examine the roles of various ontologies in enabling or shutting down the possibility of politics.

### **Politics in Four Dimensions**

In 'Politics and Space/Time,' Massey (1993) takes issue with the depoliticization of space which occurs throughout myriad conflicting definitions of space. She specifically focuses on Ernesto Laclau's contention (while pointing out similar assertions made by other commentators) that politics and space "are antinomic terms. Politics exists insofar as the spatial eludes us" (Laclau in Massey, 1993:142). Laclau conceptualizes space as a realm of stasis, dichotomously opposed to time. Space is seen as a completely self-contained system of causality. Time, on the other hand, has a disruptive power and is able to unsettle the self-determining causal structure of space. This means that temporal structures enable possibility and subsequently freedom in an otherwise pre-determined system. And because the spatial is the dichotomous opposite of temporality, it is entirely deprived of politics and freedom. Massey does not raise

this issue out of purely linguistic grounds; she is instead attempting to address a fundamentally ontological issue. She does so by using arguments with roots in Marxism, feminism, and physics.

Massey initiates the project by giving causal power over non-spatial domains back to space. She does this by expounding on the inseparability of the social and the spatial. Space is in large part formed by social forces. At the same time, spatial organization in some part shapes the functioning and form of society.

Massey proceeds to make the point that any dichotomous contrasts with presence/absence power relations, such as Laclau's conceptualization of time and space, are inherently dangerous because of their relationship to gender distinctions. This is apposite because within such presence/absence conceptualizations one half of the dichotomy is defined in positive terms (presence), while the other is defined as the absence of what is present. "The spatialization of an event consists of eliminating its temporality" (Laclau in Massey, 1993:148). Time is presence and space is absence. The dichotomy must be overcome in order for space to be more than a blank slate of temporal absence. Massey turns to physics for a reformulation of time/space relationships.

She uses an understanding of four-dimensionality, which does not imply three dimensions of space, and one of time. It speaks instead to four dimensions of space-time. Four-dimensionality thus moves space away from a dichotomous position of absence into an interwoven state with time. Space still requires a

positive definition; however, because of the interwovenness of space/time, space as a separate entity cannot have a definition because there is no absolute dimension of space. Space (or space/time) must instead be thought of in terms of interrelationships between objects, leaving us with a relational instead of absolute conceptualization of space/time. Space/time is relational because it is not a container or framework for objects and events which occur within it; it is instead created and defined by relationships between those objects and events.

Having clearly defined her stance, Massey is able to situate it between the diametrically opposed positions of Laclau and Frederic Jameson. As already discussed, Laclau removes the possibility of politics from space because space is seen as a closed and ordered system of causality. Jameson, in contrast, imagines space as being intrinsically chaotic and hence unrepresentable. Time, is counterposed as an enabler of ordered narratives of spatial processes. Time is coherent and logical, while space is unintelligible and anarchic. While Massey does not diagram her ontological stance in detail, she appears to hold a conception of time/space between the extremes of Laclau and Jameson. In order to ascribe politics to time/space, she must necessarily conceive of time/space as neither a closed and determined system, nor a system outside of the rules of causality. Her realist ontology appoints politics to time/space, but is not specifically addressed. I wish to close the final gap in Massey's argument by philosophically framing her argument between determinism and chaos in order to provide a solid ontological framework of politics in time/space.

## **Determinism vs. Free will**

Questions of determinism, indeterminism, causation, and free will were raised by the earliest philosophers and have remained fiercely debated issues. As early as 800 B.C.E, Homer's Iliad was raising these issues by presenting a world in which people's actions are caused by their surrounding "cycle of reactions" (Homer, 1963; Ilham, 1999, p.13). The outcome of battles in the story are determined by soldiers whose actions are entirely shaped and determined by external forces (Ilham, 1999, p.14; Weil, 1963). The story contains an underlying ontology which is essentially deterministic.

Determinism states that all things which occur have causes, and that there can only ever be one possible configuration for any specific instance in space and time (Machan, 1977). Everything is determined by something else or a multitude of something elses. Determinism, thus leaves no room for human freedom of choice. A person cannot claim to have freely made a choice from a number of possible choices if every occurrence is determined by others. That person exists in a world without randomness or free-will; every event is shaped by prior events, and so there was only one choice from the perceived options that could have ever been made.

It follows that determinism is the basis of logical positivism. If causation rules and the position of every atom in the universe is determined by the position of every other atom, then, with an understanding of various physical laws of the universe, it should eventually be scientifically possible to understand and predict future positions of all atoms. This, in turn, leads one to accept a positivist

epistemology that, due to causation, and with sufficient study, everything can be known and understood.

A positivist epistemology with roots in determinism has provided a framework for much research in the field of human geography. Concepts such as the gravity model assume that human behavior can be accurately predicted based on laws and past and present events and structures. However, this reductivist approach to the social sciences presents a number of problems. Just because a concept applies to atoms and rocks, does not mean that it naturally applies to human affairs (Machan, 1977). Perhaps there is something intrinsically human about free will. It does after all seem that we, at any time, can change and alter the course of our actions based on a free decision making process. This leaves us at an ontological juncture.

Pure physical determinism, as it applies to non-social elements of the world, is rather challenging to argue against. Nevertheless, anti-deterministic positions do exist in the form of Epicurus' randomly swerving atoms (Englert, 1987) and the probability of atomic waywardness in quantum theory (Hollis, 1985). Yet, how do we choose which path to walk down when we consider determinism and free will as it applies to human affairs. Are we merely atoms and molecules in an incredibly complex, yet deterministic body? Or is there something else, something distinctively human, something non-atomic that can resist the causal pull of surrounding atoms?

## **Soulless Machines**

Thomas Hobbes is regarded as one of the most prominent modern spokesmen of the dominion of universal causation. He challenged dominant ways of thinking by arguing that we should treat humans as machines or as “collections of material particles mechanically processing information” (Weatherford, 1991, p.49; Hobbes, 1997). While Hobbes may have built the human machine, Newton and Laplace created its circuits. Newton developed the theory of universal gravitation, three laws of motion, and the law of centrifugal force. These laws allowed non-contingent masses to affect each other. Laplace developed ideas considered by many to be even more Newtonian than those of Newton himself, including a heuristic expression of determinism called “Laplace’s Demon.”

We ought then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its anterior state and as the cause of the one which is to follow. Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes (Weatherford, 1991, p.55).

Laplace’s Demon in a world governed by Newton’s laws populated by Hobbes’ machines is the basis of scientific determinism. In such a scientifically deterministic world there is one start and only one end, with everything in-between already determined. We march along as soulless machines to the beat of causation without hope of providing original input to the universe. The best we

can hope to do is to understand cause so that we can unquestionably predict effect.

### **Circuitless Souls**

Descartes offers a metaphysical lifeline to those wishing to argue against a world of soulless machines. Descartes and others, such as Thomas Aquinas, divide the world into two distinct substances: mind and matter (Weatherford, 1991). Of course, entirely convincing arguments either for or against this position cannot be offered due to the nature of the question. Furthermore, this paper is not the place to present a detailed discussion of whether a soul or non-material mind exists; using the concept of a soul as a base for the following arguments is not a case of slipping into the fallacy of argumentum ad ignorantum. These arguments can be either accepted or rejected by the reader according to their epistemological and ontological standpoint. I will merely use the idea of a non-material mind as a way of allowing free will to mount a stand against the charges of determinism.

Plato applied the concepts of good and evil to the circuitless soul in order to argue for free will. If a person lacks wisdom, his or her actions will be determined by evil or malicious forces. However, if that person has attained wisdom and has a good soul, he or she can freely choose actions and life directions. Thus, the non-material forces of good and evil in combination with a non-material mind allow the possibility of free-will in this worldview (Ilham, 1999).

Other early philosophers such as St. Augustine built on these concepts to argue that free will is a gift of God. We have been placed in an indeterministic world by a higher power. In fact, the very purpose of the universe is to allow us to exercise our free will in order to choose between what is right and what is wrong (Augustine, 1947; Ilham, 1999). Thomas Aquinas builds on this position by introducing the concept of an independent will which guides our actions. Descartes also remarks on the topic: “The will is so free in its nature, that it can never be constrained – the actions of the soul are absolutely in its power and can only be indirectly changed by the body” (Ilham, 1999; p.125). A variety of other arguments against causality exist, including an inherent randomness in the functioning of the universe, miracles, and swerving atoms. Most of these positions cannot be argued for using scientific logic and are instead based upon ontologies grounded in various religious traditions.

### **Three Choices**

Contingent on your beliefs, we are either circuitless souls or soulless machines. The world we inhabit is either deterministic or not, depending on whether you subscribe to ideas of non-material minds or divine gifts of free will. The purpose of laying out these arguments is simply to explore the requirements behind determinism and free will. In doing so, I can discuss how these concepts are the basis of three ontological positions related to causality.

Causality and determinism are clear and apparent in the world inhabited by soulless machines. Circuitless souls, however, are faced with two ontological

options: they either live in a causal or non-causal universe. I will present a discussion of four acausal theories: occasionalism, pre-established harmony, pure randomness, and Sartrean existentialism, and then dissent a realist position of causality without determinism.

The occasionalist position is that all events which occur on our ontological plane of existence are caused by God. Events, in this worldview, are not caused by other events. God must act for any substance which cannot act for itself. But, as God is the only entity, in this worldview, with the true power of action, God incessantly produces actions and events (Bobro, 2005). Leibniz (1966) points out that this view implies that God made errors during the process of creation, because constant miracles (or causes without non-divine effects) are performed to lead the universe in a certain direction. This stands in contrast to a more perfect universe which would unfold naturally without divine influence (Bobro, 2005).

Despite the existence of circuitless souls and the arguable lack of causation in occasionalism, this position is rather deterministic. Furthermore, few philosophers and theologians are advocates of this position. Notable exceptions, however, include certain Christian, Jewish, and Muslim organizations such as elements of AlQaeda who attribute all events to the divine hand of God.

Pre-established harmony, like occasionalism, holds that causation can not exist between entities. The difference between the two positions is that pre-established harmony does not take God to be the cause of all effects (Bobro, 2005). This position, does, however, base itself on the existence of a benevolent

God who has created a universe with some inherent pre-established harmony (Leibniz, 1985). Time is linear with a start and an end, and the pre-established harmony will unfold as intended by the creator. The mental and physical are seen as being essentially distinct, with neither having causal power over the other. It is the harmony between the mind and non-mind which allows events to happen (Leibniz, 1989). For example, according to pre-established harmony, if I throw a basketball I have not caused the basketball to be thrown. Instead, the basketball has caused itself to move because of the harmony between my mind and the ball.

Again, similar to occasionalism, pre-existing harmony rejects causation and accepts a non-material mind. Furthermore, pre-existing harmony is inherently deterministic. Two important acausal and non-deterministic positions should also be presented. The first is the concept of a simple acausal universe. The position of everything in it is randomly determined. Any perceived non-randomness is simply coincidence or a misunderstood interpretation of randomness. While not finding many advocates, this position must nonetheless be presented as it is the contrapositive of pure determinism. Sartrean existentialism offers another escape route from causality. Sartre disregards the past and future and holds that humans are able only to understand the present (Sartre, 1964). Human consciousness is described as nothingness; it is an activity, not an object (Audi, 1999). Because of the (non-)nature of consciousness it is self-determining and not subject to laws of causation (Sartre, 1956).

Sartrean existentialism is a link into our third ontological choice. We have the option of accepting a view of the world according to soulless machines, or we can assent to the acausal ideas of either occasionalism, pre-established harmony, pure randomness, or Sartrean existentialism. In terms of human understanding of the world, this leaves us with a choice between a theoretically understandable deterministic world and a largely unpredictable universe. Sartre gives us a bridge to a middle ground because even though his nothingness of the human consciousness precludes causality, it says nothing about causal elements operating on everything which is not nothingness. It is unclear whether the world objectively exists outside of the activity of consciousness in Sartrean existentialism, but there remains a theoretical possibility of an independent causal universe containing indeterministic elements such as circuitless souls, nothingness, and occasional random events. The nothingness of existentialists' consciousnesses may not perceive or acknowledge such a world, but lack of perception and understanding does not necessarily equate to nonexistence.

### **Realism as a Third Way**

Realists hold that objects, and relationships between them, can continue to exist independent of human knowledge and perception (Sayer, 2000). They take a middle ground on issues of acausality and determinism in their acceptance of causality but rejection of determinism. In doing so, realists aim to explain causes, rather than predict pre-determined events (Williams, 1981).

Realists can reject universal determinism because of the central role which “contingency” plays in realism. Contingency “signals the possibility of multiple outcomes derived from similar causal processes due to the complexity of social relations embedded in spatially differentiated contexts” (Jones and Hanham, 1995, p.187). It is often traced to the role of agency in social process, but could theoretically also be partly or wholly traced to quantum chaos (Sayer, 1992; Jones and Hanham, 1995).

Realists thus do not focus on the prediction of future events and instead concern themselves with the need to explain the causes of past occurrences. In contrasting realism with scientific positivism, Keat and Urry (1975, p.27) note that positivists “only give us good, or conclusive, reasons for believing that the explanandum-event either will or did occur. They do not necessarily tell us why that event did or will occur.”

A delineation of all of the causal processes involved in any phenomena allows the realist to understand why an event occurred. This is in contrast to a Humean view of causation that forms the basis of much positivist scientific explanation. The Humean conception of causation asserts that if event B temporally succeeds event A in a situation where events that are the same as B are always preceded by events that are the same as A then causation has occurred. The positivist reliance on precedence and repeated succession fails to identify the meanings of relationships. Realism can instead help to identify connecting mechanisms between connected causal events by focusing on both

regular relations between phenomena and linking mechanisms (Keat and Urry, 1975).

A core tenet of realism is that a reality exists independent of human perception and cognition. This does not, however, mean that the world independent of human perceptions can always be fully known, as we still only know elements of the world through our imperfect conceptions of them. Realists are careful to separate reality into three distinct domains: the domain of the real which refers to unobservable mechanisms, the domain of the actual which refers to observable events and phenomena, and the domain of the empirical which refers to human experiences of events. The domains of the real, actual, and empirical, in tandem with realism's non-atomistic ontology and non-empiricist epistemology allow different structures, processes, and mechanisms to be revealed at different levels of reality (Cloke et. al., 1991). Contextual contingencies and a non-atomistic ontology mean that different domains of the real can result from similar situations. At the same time, human immersion within the domain of the empirical while trying to understand the domain of the real means that imperfect human perceptions cannot penetrate through the different levels of reality. Contextual contingencies and different domains of reality allow for unpredictability and indeterminism. It is this unpredictability and indeterminism that enables politics in time/space.

## **A Space for Politics**

The term 'politics' has a variety of possible interpretations. Massey uses it to denote notions of directed power combined with openness, possibility, change, free will, and indeterminism (Massey, 1993; Massey, 1999). In short, politics is the ability of A (which could be comprised of A', A'', etc. or multiple instances of A) to have causal effects on B (which could consist of B', B'', etc., or multiple instances of B) in situation one and causal effects on C in situation two, where situations one and two are identical or deeply similar. Using her definition of politics I examine the possibility for it in the deterministic, acausal, and realist ontologies laid out in this paper.

In a deterministic world inhabited by soulless machines governed by Newtonian mechanics, A will have causal effects on B and only B in any given situation. In order for the effect of A on B to be varied, situation two, three, and so on, would have to be different from situation one. Politics is thus unattainable and inconceivable in a purely deterministic world. The lack of any cause in an acausal universe similarly rules out the prospect of politics.

In summary, Massey's time/space politics requires some of the ontological frameworks outlined in this paper. Time/space politics needs a causal, yet indeterministic world to enable the possibility of politics. Furthermore, time/space can be specifically politicized in realism, because of the weight given to context in the causal process.

Realism offers geographers a way to avoid the pitfalls of model-building and predication in positivism and at the same time permits a circumvention of

various defeatist positions related to human understandings of the world (Stockmann, 1983). Massey and other realists do not consider the elucidation of causal structures to be the end goal of the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, realism is often combined with feminism or Marxism in an attempt to use knowledge of how processes work to create a more just and equitable society. Roy Bhaskar (1989, p.5) notes, “the world cannot be rationally changed unless it is adequately interpreted.”

In *Explanation in Geography*, Harvey (1969, p.5) notes that “philosophies of geography are dependent upon beliefs, and that although we may analyse them to make certain of their consistency and coherence, we cannot analyse away their very foundations.” This paper has offered a look at those very foundations alluded to by Harvey. The contextual contingencies of realism offer us a way to understand time/space politics in order to actively improve human society.

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