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## THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY GEOGRAPHIC REFLECTION. IS IT A STEP TOWARDS THE NARRATIVE OF AGENCY OF PLACE?

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### Abstract

The study addresses two current issues in social geography: the modern reflection on the topic of agency and the possibility of introducing the notion of place agency. When discussing human-environment relations, geographers more often use the terms more-than-human or non-human beings and focus on the animal and plant worlds. However, the symmetrical or mutual relationship between humans and the natural environment can be linked to a question arises about the wider scope of the notion of place agency and understanding the phenomenon of place as an entity acting on its own rights.

### Key words

place • agency • sense of place • conversation with place

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### Introduction

Agency is a fundamental category in the social sciences (Barnes, 2000; Keiling & Erhard, 2020). For decades it has been a concept and a phenomenon discussed extensive and in-depth in philosophical (Taylor, 1989), socio-logical (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 2000), psychological (Beckmann, 1998; Kennett, 2001; Balconi, 2010) and political (Giddens, 1977) aspects. The intellectual base for discussion

about agency is built from the perspective of many different viewpoints. Not only is agency an interesting theoretical concept, but it is an important category in action as well. It then describes the entire spectrum of civic activity (Buczkowski & Cichocki 1989; Dalton, 1993; Cichocki, 1996; Donk et al., 2004; Vainikka, 2012; Editorial, 2013).

But let me stay with the conceptual understanding of the term. In recent years it is not only sociologists who have gone beyond

the classical approaches to the discussion around agency: individual-structure or voluntarism-determinism. Scientists increasingly take up the topics of causative symmetrical relations in the context of non-human beings, paying attention to human-plant relations (Hall, 2011), human-animal relations (Carter & Charles, 2013, 2018), and also the role of material objects in the construction of mutual links with human beings (Komter, 2001). Issues of more-than-human beings are also an important area of debate in widely understood geography (Pitt, 2018). Human-environment relations are not only described in the category of more-than-human being, but they actually enter the search for an environmental sense of agency and become the focus of social geographic disciplines hitherto not paying attention to this aspect, e.g. communication geography (Adams, 2017), developing scientific thought at the interface of environmental and social geography (Castree & Braun, 2001; Larsen & Johnson, 2017) as well as conceptual approach to cyber-geography (Rose, 2017). In intriguing ways, geographers raise issues of machine-human relations (Booth, 2018), the sense of agency of animals and plants (Taylor & Carter, 2013; Hovorka, 2018; Pitt, 2018), objects and their creators (Rose et al., 2010; Colin, 2017), as well as technologies, algorithms, and their creators as causative actors (Rose, 2017). The theme of symmetrical human-environment relations is also taken up in the contemporary critical trend of physical geography (Meyer et. al., 2017; Lave et al., 2018). In this case, the issue of sense of agency and the environmental self is admittedly not raised explicitly. However, there is an opinion that points to the necessity of redefinition of human-environment relations and a break with the centralization of the human position.

In more or less literal reflection, agency begins to be considered as an environmental theoretical construct and a pragmatic way of approaching the geographical environment. From a perspective external to this social discipline, space and place seem a logical and natural development and complement to this

scholarly discussion. A Polish literary scholar notes this writing: "To these lines of tension [defining place, author's note] I would add one more, and an extremely important one: is place only a product of human activity, or can it be treated as a causative factor? The dominant theories of the cultural turn in the 1990s treated place primarily as a product of social practices, leading to strong versions of constructivism. It is not difficult to notice that such a standpoint strongly objectifies the place, making it solely an object of human activity and reducing it to only one anthropocentric dimension. Nevertheless, in the 1990s concepts began to emerge that departed from constructivist reductionism and acknowledged the sense of agency and an active role of places – among others by the geographer Robert David Sack or the philosophers Jeff Malpas and Edward Casey, but also the sociologist Bruno Latour" (Rybicka, 2015: 170).

There is a lot of truth in the quoted words. However, I believe that geographically the debate has a chance to develop not so much in the narrative axis: *place as the product of human activity - place as the causative factor* but *place as the product of human activity and perception - place as a self-constituting being*. In the second decade of the 21st century, two trends emerged that offer opportunities for the development of geographical thought towards a different view of the idea of *place*. These approaches pay less attention to a human-oriented sense of place. I have in mind one of the currently more popular theories of place assemblage (Dovey, 2008, 2010) and the approach that explains the geographic self in relations of *Indigenous Groups with space and place* (Larsen & Johnson, 2016).

In the following paragraphs I will try to draw attention to the fact that the narration of the sense of agency, especially in the context of place in the mirror of dialogue with place, introduced by geographers into the social sciences, may make it possible to adopt a different perspective on the phenomenon of agency, but also on human-environment relations. While, of course, I fully agree with

the canonical view regarding the cognitive representation of place, I posit that the biotic and geographical environment goes beyond the *materially carved out place* in question. The environment, including various places that make up environmental settlements, is in dialogue with us. Perhaps this human-place dialogue makes it possible to look at the biotic and geographical environment from an agency perspective and, as a result, to formulate a deeper narrative about the agency of place.

When juxtaposed with such views, a geographical perspective on the narrative of agency can be a catalyst for quite different thinking and practices of action. It can initiate reflection that turns the *human-oriented* point of view into an *environment-symmetric* (in my case 'place-symmetric') approach, both in the dimension of theoretical explanatory narrative and operational research and application programs. With these statements in mind, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- presentation of the emerging, present geographical reflection on the environmental sense of agency and looking at this trend from the perspective of ordering this reflection,
- a discussion of the possibility of introducing the notion of agency of place into a broader narrative of place by delving into the dialogue with place and reflecting on the anatomy of such a dialogue with place.

In this paper, I omit the extensive discussion in the geographical literature on the subjective aspect of the animal and plant worlds and I focus on the aspect related to the "idea of place" both in the context of the geographical and built environment.

## Agency in a contemporary geographical perspective

The concept of agency is a term and a central phenomenon in the social sciences (Barnes, 2000; Keiling, Erhard, 2020). The literature on this topic is both extensive and in-depth in philosophical (Taylor, 1989), sociological

(Giddens, 1984; Archer, 2000; Wielecki, 2003), psychological (Beckmann, 1998; Reykowski, 1989; Kennett, 2001; Balconi, 2010) and political (Giddens, 1977; Brodziak, 2016) aspects. Consequently, this is not an attempt to make an in-depth presentation or analysis of the issue of agency in the broader context of the social sciences. In the social sciences agency is associated with the ability to take action despite opposing structural conditions (Giddens, 1984), responsibility (Barnes, 2000; Kockelman, 2013), free will (Archer, 2000) and the relationship of the individual and society, individual identity and civil rights. Early geographical views and reflections on agency grow directly out of the sociological trend, particularly developed in the 1970s and 1980s. The geographical inspirations of the time go back to the reflections of Giddens (1977, 1979, 1984) in the works of Thrift (1983, 1985), Pred (1984), Moos and Dear (1986), Dear and Moos (1986), Gregson (1987). Structuration theory which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, attracted the interest of social geographers, who sought to find links between agency, structuration, time, and space from the beginning. One of the earliest geographical accounts of structure is Thrift's (1983) historical study. A more in-depth analysis of the structuration theory by Giddens in the context of application in human geography can be found in the study 'Approaching human geography: an introduction to contemporary theoretical debates' (Cloke et al., 1991).

However, contemporary discussions by geographers (Larsen & Johnson, 2016; Adams, 2017; Rose, 2017) on the sense of agency go beyond sociological narratives of the term or even attempt to give agency a broader and distinctly geographical narrative field. Geographers currently more readily turn to the works of philosophers (Casey, 2001; Latour, 2004; Stegler, 1998, 2009, 2010) and build their reflections on the basis of nonrepresentational theory, actor-network theory and the more-than-human approach. Researchers more often speak about the symmetrical relationship between the biotic environment

and humans. Still relatively less frequent are the themes of the symmetrical relationship between the geographical environment (space and place) and humans.

At least two interesting lines of reflection can be outlined in the current of geographical reflection on the sense of agency, from which deeper thought on environmental self may emerge:

1. *Indigenous Groups.* Reflection on Indigenous Groups is a well-established area of inquiry for linguistic anthropologists in regions of the world such as Australia and North America (Basso, 1990; Ryden, 1993). It is natural for researchers to learn about the everyday life of communities that have been marginalized for decades. Multi-faceted research is being undertaken on the ancestors and generations of current Indigenous Groups. Anthropological research has resulted in a number of publications on the role of space and place from the perspective of Indigenous Groups (Basso, 1990; Feld, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1996; Memmott & Long, 2002; Friesen, 2008). Researchers increasingly began to find a causal, symmetrical, or even sometimes dominant participation of places in the lives of representatives of Indigenous Groups. In the past, specific places directed Indigenous Groups through their lives. They were a kind of pivot of that life. Even today these specific spaces play a significant role in the individual and social biographies of the representatives of Indigenous Groups. In the last decade, this trend has been borrowed by geographers and theses on the existence of a specific geographical self and subjectivity of place have been formulated. The relationships of Indigenous Groups with the place seem archetypal for understanding the agency of place in a wider context. As Larsen and Johnson (2016:1) write in the opening sentences of their text, from this point of view 'place and self are co-constituted', and 'place speaks, creates and teaches' us as humans. The explorations of the cited geographers are inspired by the observations of anthropologists

and also by the reflections of philosophers like Casey (2001), Latour (2004, 2014), and Kuokkanen (2008). As a result, the question of extended agency towards the phenomenon of place is becoming the subject of a distinct scholarly debate in geography (Adams, 2017).

2. *Posthuman Agency* and *Urban Agency*, *Citiness*, *Sentient City* (Amin, 2007; Rose et al., 2010; Shepard, 2011; Amin & Thrift, 2016; Rose, 2017). In this view, the human being is analyzed not only in the world of equal biotic beings (more-than-human approaches) and geographical environment but is located in the posthuman perspective of modern technology, algorithms and cooperating technological systems, animated by the human mind. Rose stresses that "geographical scholarship, from the beginning of its interest in digital technologies, has been concerned with both human agency and with the intersection of digital technologies with existing forms of social difference" (Rose, 2017:26). She finds inspirations for such considerations among others in the philosophical works of Stiegler (1998, 2009, 2010). Researchers focus on urbanized environments. They highlight the theme of new technologies in the city reactively collaborating not so much with people but with their 'theoretical duties'. New technologies are creating a sentient city that, through technological support, offers spaces/places that remember and anticipate human behavior (Shepard, 2011). Shepard hints that in this construction, no longer merely intellectual, we can imagine a park bench that gives us as users signals to leave the place that we have occupied for too long or in an inappropriate way. In the same narrative, Amin describes public spaces: "[I]nformatics-saturated public space as a habitat of distributed sentience, with humans alone no longer doing the thinking and acting as diverse kinds of capability form in chains of computational intelligence linking mobile devices, electronic sensors, mathematical models, software code, and sophisticated computing" (Amin,

2015: 245). The study of posthuman agency at the present time is increasingly the subject of inquiry by geographers who find both areas of social development and exclusion. When discussing posthuman agency, Rose notes that "digital technologies simply reflect social differences that exist already in the 'offline world'" (Rose, 2017: 2016). From this trend a reflection currently emerges on the hybridization of agency of humans and the return to places through disentangling from digital connections (Jansson & Adams, 2021).

Is there a chance to discuss place agency on a broader scale? In my opinion, an interesting thread that could develop this type of reflection by geographers is the idea of dialogue with place, which is the centre of considerations of this paper.

### Towards the narration of agency of place?

In this section I want to reflect on the notion of agency of place and its possible wider geographical context.

An important catalyst for our thoughts related to the agency of place is the literature on *Indigenous Groups-space* relations referenced earlier. It is so clearly rooted in ethno-geographical discussions that it offers a chance to build a 'bridge' to a more generalized approach to the notions of *space-place-biotic environment-human* in the context of agency.

At least as much can be said about the semantic category of *place* in geography as about the category of *agency* in the debate conducted in the social sciences. *Place*, very often discussed in social geography in conjunction with the concept of space, are basic constructs (Lisowski, 2003). Sometimes one can have the impression that the notion of *place* is so intellectually well thought out in geographical reflection that it is difficult to find new cognitively interesting themes in its semantic scope. The phrases written and uttered over the last nearly 50 years

of debates about *place* have recognized the scope of this concept and phenomenon very deeply and in different directions. In a sense, wherever we wander in the intellectual discussion of *place* today, we almost always find the traces of Yi Fu Tuan, the initiator of geographical thought about this construct (Tuan, 1974, 1991; Adams, 2017). The thinker, scholar and observer of the surrounding reality uttered many phrases on this reflection which were ahead of their time. The following decades of geographers' discussions on *place* brought further important milestones concerning, among other things, places creating *placelessness* (Relph, 1976), places losing meaning as a result of mediation through now traditional media (Meyerowitz, 1985), places structuring themselves in time-space (Thrift, 1983, 1985), the dynamics and processuality of places and their gendered context (Massey, 1994), or the space-place dialectic interwoven into communicative processes (Adams, 2010; Adams & Jansson, 2012). In this traditional approach, place emerges from space by superimposing different senses of place.

The last decade of the 1990s saw a shift towards pragmatic thought. Based on the development of planning theory, practical *place making* began to play a prominent role in discussions. The discussion evolved into the implementable, though often missed, creation of liveable places (Courage et al., 2021). More theoretical and quantitative themes of the debate on *place* have been developed by environmental psychologists focusing on the issue of place attachment and essentialism (Scanell & Gifford, 2010; Lewicka, 2011; Lewicka et. al., 2019).

Summarizing in a few phrases the concepts of place that emerged in the past five decades, one can write that the vast majority of them had in their assumptions a more or less explicit and intentional separation of culture and nature. As a consequence, *place* in its spatial and environmental dimension was reduced to an important but mechanical factor influencing and reinforcing human action. Several decades of discussion on *place* in geography can be summarized by the common

denominator of a human oriented approach and de facto placing the cognitive representation of places at the center.

In the second decade of the 21st century, two trends emerged that offer opportunities for the development of geographical thought towards a different view of the idea of *place*. These approaches pay less attention to a human-oriented sense of place. I have in mind one of the currently more popular theories of place assemblage (Dovey, 2008, 2010), which is sometimes referred to as a different paradigm towards the essence of place (Muminović, 2015) rooted in ANT theory, and, the already mentioned approach that explains the geographic self in relations of *Indigenous Groups with space and place* (Larsen & Johnson, 2016). In the first case, place is linked in networks of relations. Scholars representing the trend of inquiry around assemblage do not refer to the phenomenon of agency. However, the construction of the assemblage gives a clear stimulus to the search for a reflection around a more-than-human-oriented place.

In turn, the trend referring to the *relations of Indigenous Group with place* is a second and perhaps equally attractive and prospective concept of *place* in the 21st century leading straight to singling out the *agency of place* as such. I use the conditional here bearing in mind that the debate in this area is just at an early stage in Anglo-American studies. Nevertheless, sooner or later, the geographical environment will have to face an intellectual reworking of agency in this context. In my opinion, it is worth trying to construct some pre-conceptual interpretative framework of the notion, the phenomenon and the trend leading to the discussion about the *agency of place*.

Of course, when introducing environmental narratives into analyses of human-place relations, one must keep in mind that this approach has nothing to do with the geographical determinism of the first half of the twentieth century.

Agency in an environmental context can elicit associations referring to environmental

determinism. This, in turn, is associated in contemporary geography, not just social one, as a radically conservative way of narrating the modern world (Gilmartin, 2009). In fact, using the phrases 'radical and conservative' does not fully convey the concerns about environmental determinism and the return to the discussion on eugenics expressed by Anglo-American geographers (Huntington, 1924). Admittedly, still few researchers develop deterministic reflection from a geographical perspective (Diamond, 1999, 2002, 2014, 2019). However, when taking up this issue they are, on the one hand, aware that they evoke the 'demons of the past' and on the other hand that they are balancing on the delicate border of scientific and non-scientific cognition, and they introduce a valuable and socially dangerous type of reflection in the geographical environment. In the context of the considerations I am interested in, by adopting the assumptions of environmental determinism, human agency is drastically reduced and social inequalities resulting from inhabiting a diverse geographical environment are legitimized. It is easy to understand that these terms are distinctly associated today with colonialism and postcolonialism, both in terms of the latest scientific knowledge and socio-historical experience, and thus carry an enormous pejorative charge. As a result, there are sometimes very radically articulated objections in the geographical literature to scientific work that continues environmental determinism (Correia, 2013). Geographical agency can be associated with a return to deterministic ideas through a slightly different scientific door. To allay such fears, the discussion of the geographic self requires a little more thought in forming arguments about the sense of agency of the environment and the role of humans in these relationships. It is very important that the reflection on the sense of agency of the environment and its self and the decentralization of the human position in the network of mutual human – more-than-human relations does not deprive human beings of the symmetry of relations. Under such assumptions, the geographical reflection on agency

initiated nowadays, outlines a cognitively, but also pragmatically very interesting trend of decentralizing human sense of agency and opening up to the role of environment in co-constituting on our planet.

### **Can place hold a dialogue with us and constitute in its own rights?**

This is seemingly a question that many people may quickly answer in the negative. Certainly this issue is a complex and difficult query to answer, although the answer is not at all clear and negative (Kuokkanen, 2008; Latour, 2014). Place is variously defined and comes to be regarded as a multifaceted concept (Dovey, 2008; Malpas, 2012). In my considerations, place is a dynamic and progressive (Massey, 1994) assemblage (Dovey, 2010) of biotic, geographical and cultural<sup>1</sup> layers /elements, supplemented, extended or explicitly altered by a phenomenological sense of that space. The place is a kind of palimpsest of these layers, a living palimpsest. The biotic and geographical environment brings this palimpsest to life. In different specific cases, the biotic, geographical and cultural layers will co-occur in different intensities. Places connecting and interpenetrating each other create environmental settlement. While I can give examples of biotic and geographical environments without cultural stigmas, it is difficult to imagine a built environment

without biotic and geographical layers. In the axis of reflection on conversation or dialogue with place which is of interest for me, a kind of continuum of places emerges from natural (biotic and geographical) environment settlements to fully built environment ones.

The place is therefore brought to life inherently and objectively. We will see this when we observe undeveloped places such as the locations of sailing stones in Death Valley, Yellowstone geysers, the Rainbow Mountains of Danxia, or the bioluminescence of living organisms in the Black Sea or on the Norfolk coast of England.

The above references to the observation of nature in contact with human beings are no less, no more, examples of encounters in which a specific interactive relation with the biotic environment and geography, understood in the broadest possible sense, takes place. This relationship is based on an encounter not so much '*in place*' as '*with place*' and is linked to an exchange of meaning with the animated environment. In my view, the situations of human encounters with these places go beyond the acquisition of cognitive representations during cognitive processes and the experience of specific emotions. Obviously, the signs, signals, and symbols created by a geographically defined place are not intentional, places do not experience our responses in the psychological sense of the word, and our responses do not usually elicit dynamic environmental responses. In the latter case, however, the latest measurement technologies can show a completely different picture of how the environment reacts to our activity. In view of the above, in the vast majority of cases people watching the sunset or walking in the woods will not think that such an activity can be a form of symmetrical dialogue. After all, we don't get an explicit response from places, we don't get intentional messages, and we don't wait for our signals to be returned. So the environment and space that make up a place are not, in our perception, partners with us as human beings.

The narrative of the dialogue between places and people and more-than-humans

<sup>1</sup> The distinguished layers refer in turn: biotic layer – they are fauna and flora, which in the contemporary literature of the subject are commonly regarded as more-than-human beings; geographical layer – they are such elements of the environment as the climate components (temperature, winds, humidity, precipitation, cloudiness, insolation) etc.; latitude, surface configuration and the type of substrate, altitude above sea level etc.; cultural layer – all the creations being the consequence of the human activity. In the presented division, geographical elements of the environment are also treated as more-than-human components. Traditional divisions and classifications in this respect, e.g. into animate and inanimate, material and natural environment etc. are no longer adequate to the knowledge we possess, in my opinion. They may clearly classify the human environment and have an ordering power but they do not have, in my opinion, an explanatory power.

beings may be noticed by a poet, perhaps a scholar, but can it be noticed also by a participant in such events? Very often, probably most often, we experience such situations in highly technologically developed societies as a kind of interruption in our daily lives. Let me add, a life dynamic and increasingly encapsulated by algorithmic digital reality. We treat a walk to watch the sunset or an expedition to see the aurora borealis as a trek to a certain spectacle in which events happen quite mechanically and in a predetermined way. Nowadays, in this age of advanced digital technology, we are perhaps more consumed with taking a photo than we are interested in experiencing the moment. If this is indeed the case, issues of daily reflection on the ability of places to hold a conversation with us become completely metaphorical and unrealistic. This does not mean, however, that such a conversation, and in effect the existence of places in their own rights, does not take place.

According to Larsen and Johnson, this dimension specific own rights of place can be called *the geographic self* (Larsen & Johnson, 2016). Biotic beings and geographical attributes, i.e. two of the three layers creating placers, become active participants of encounters with the human being, and the human being, although it may be difficult for them to admit it, has a decentralized position in these encounters. Naturally, as a species we are capable of changing places environmentally and have been doing so for decades in an increasingly intense way. In this context, placers in their spatial and environmental layers undergo mechanical transformations or complete destruction. It is to these ideas that the approaches of designed and planned *sustainable development*, *eco-urbanism*, *ecosystem services* and *place making* refer. At the core of these activities is human interventionism in the environment. The questions that make up these trends refer to what kind of intervention to plan in order to change our environment rather than what to do to improve the situation on a more holistic scale or in the context of a *place-symmetric* or *environment-symmetric* point of view.

The agency of the centrally oriented human being stands, as it were, in counterpoint to the environment that conducts a dialogue with the human being on its own terms. Having the sense of agency, we are able to react and make free decisions despite certain conditions. However, from the perspective of the *agency of place*, beyond us is a vast spectrum of living beings and the geographic environment we customarily call inanimate, which in fact not only have rights, but actively work to the rhythm of these rules. Certainly, environmental activities lack reflexivity. But at the same time, the actions of the geographical environment are carried out beyond our will and next to us, and they can change our individual 'I' and social 'We'.

Still interesting cognitive questions in this trend of considerations remain the issues of:

- the face of the sense of place agency,
- its way of responding to our communications and presence,
- the way in which place is the recipient and sender of meanings that expand and affirm its sense of agency.

These are questions that require both academic debate and in-depth research studies. However, at the present time, with the current level of scientific reflection towards the existing world, these are not just rhetorical questions. In fact, these are questions that provoke not only philosophical reflection, but also intellectual confrontation in the fields of geography, sociology, ethnography and environmental psychology, and perhaps also involving representatives of scientific disciplines.

The dialogue with place in the built environment certainly remains a more complex issue. From the perspective of the traditional planning approach, the answer is probably unequivocally negative. From the perspective of classical planning canons (Allmendinger, 2002), the development of space and the creation or transformation of built environment refers to 'hard' planning intervention and giving the final shape to this environment precisely by a planner in the broadest sense. In this case, at most a dialogue between the user and the creator of the places can take

place Admittedly, a pragmatic place making approach is clearly developing in contemporary European debate towards sustainable and eco-systemic construction of urban public spaces. However, the planning paradigm thus formulated is still centered around planning intervention and the human being. Biotic and geographical environment are the subject of development, modelling, shaping, revitalization etc. In this situation the built environment will communicate with human beings or inform them through various signs, signals and symbols created by the human and placed by them in this space. In this view, it is undeniable that places will be produced through a social process. The discussion on public participation will not change the situation. It will still be a human-oriented perspective that excludes dialogue with place in the sense I am considering here. Is it then possible to seek this conversation with place in the built environment?

Certainly the introduction of the assumptions of dialogue with place in the dimension of the built environment creates a distinctly different approach to place planning and to the ideas of sustainable development, eco-urbanism and eco-system services. A chance to develop reflections on the causality of the urbanized environment is possible when I make assumptions that say:

- Although the communication shape of the city, its material, technical equipment and objects are constructs of human agency, these creations are immersed in the biotic and geographical environment livable on its own rights.
- The biotic environment and geographical attributes exist in the urban fabric not only because they serve certain purposes, but also because they independently exist, live and become independent of the human. They are de facto the essential conversation partner for human beings, not the object of action.
- The world of objects, algorithms and digital technology 'completes the space', 'expands it', becomes an element of socio-environmental assemblage based on communicative relations, neither replacing nor

dethroning human beings or more-than-human beings.

With such assumptions, the discussion on the causality of the built, urbanized, planned and organized environment can become an important element of the reflection on the agency of place as a 'deus ex machina' of a new type of planning and, more importantly, of thinking about space and place.

### **A dialogue with place: a step towards recognizing the agency of place or more-than human idea?**

In the early 1990s, Casey wrote: 'Our lives are so place-oriented and place saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer place-lessness would be like' (Cassey, 1993: ix). This phrase was cited more than a decade later by Buchanan and Lambert in 2005, confirming its importance (Buchanan & Lambert 2005: 1). In my opinion, this view is still fully valid, and we will probably agree on the importance of this thought for decades to come. Nowadays, however, I can develop it by writing that human life is indeed still *place-oriented*, but the concepts trying to explain this phenomenon are mostly human-centered, and the thinking is still far from views containing a place-symmetric perspective. I agree with those authors (Larsen & Johnson, 2013, 2016, 2017; Bawaka Country et. al., 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017) who believe that in order to fully understand the phenomenon of place one must abandon the centrality of the human in the world around us. As Bawka Country researchers recall "Within a Yol.u Indigenous ontology, animals, rocks, winds, tides, emotions, spirits, songs and humans speak. They all have language and knowledge and Law. They all send messages; communicate with each other" (Bawaka country et al., 2015: 273). This in no way implies questioning the knowledge derived from a phenomenological point of view, but rather an extension of this orientation to include geographical reflection. Contemporary knowledge concerning the environment allows me to formulate a thesis that a place

as an environmental category lives according to biotic and geographical rights, and a human being is one of the participants of the relationship with place. Place is between space and sense of place. Naturally, the question of how a dialogue with place can occur is already a somewhat more complex topic in the discussion of the sense of place agency. Bearing in mind the considerations so far, I would like to reflect on the anatomy of the dialogue between the human being and place. In my view, this dialogue opens up the possibility of applying the concept of place agency to the geographical discussion. I will therefore try, while preserving the narrative nature of the study, to go out in search of more operational and analytical explanations of the dialogue with place.

The basic assumption of my approach to the phenomenon of place is a thesis that place holds a constant dialogue with the human being on equal and symmetrical (or mutual) terms and exists on its own rights. Naturally, this dialogue, or synonymously used term conversation, takes place in a different way than we imagine when we hear and read this word. In his article 'Philosophy-in-Place and the provenance of dialogue', Janz (2015) opens the field of debate on dialogue by invoking a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari (1994). One of the sentences describing Deleuze's views on intellectual scientific dialogue with Guattari is "... We were never in the same rhythm (...)", (Janz, 2015: 481; after Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: viii). Janz himself leads his reflections by wandering intellectually between the differences and similarities of the dialogue, asking: "What is the relationship between dialogue and conversation? Discussion? Chat? Interview? Dialectic? Discourse? Speaking and listening? Text?" (Janz, 2015: 482).

Aware of the need to clarify our understanding of *dialogue with place* and the earlier references, I turn to the thought of Bohm (1996: 3), who in a phrase close to Deleuze's statement, writes: "in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already

known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together".

This kind of sensitivity to dialogue opens up our understanding of the act when we converse with place. Place complements the other person in the communication encounter or even fills their position. Content as signs, signals and symbols (Adams, 2005, 2010) in conversation or dialogue is understood by me as an exchange of meanings between a person and a place in different rhythms and tensions. These exchanges of meaning can create new value, state, new content (Duncan, 1990).

This dialogue is not always clear and is hardly ever in the same language. But by delving into Bohm's words and looking at Deleuze's short but incisive phrase, we learn that a conversation reduced to dialogue need not be carried out in a single, common language. Dialogue can exist between human beings from different cultures and with different languages, or it can be between human and non-human beings. In my narrative, dialogue is also possible with the environment and, in effect, with a more particularized place. Dialogue takes place on broader levels than communication and is more capacious and creative. Some of the 'answers' are given in a longer time than we can imagine in classical communication. A dialogue or conversation with a place can be unintentional but have meaning and influence the other side of that arrangement. Dialogue positions the parties in a symmetrical, starting sense of agency and allows them to express themselves in their own rights.

Dialogue with place has its own internal anatomy. It is both simple and complex. According to my considerations, it takes place in three vectors of conversation: '*within place*', '*about place*' and sensu stricto '*with place*' (Kotus et al., 2018). The third vector of conversation '*with place*' goes beyond the previous framework of looking at the sense of place. The first two vectors of conversation or more descriptively areas of meaning exchange are traditional. These are meetings of people in a place and exchanges

of meanings about the place based on mediation. Although currently, in the case of the vector of conversation '*about place*', there is a dynamic expansion of this conversational sphere by digital technologies. However, this does not mean that this vector is a new plane. It should always be remembered that in the pre-digital era there was also mediation, which is still present today, be it through the messages contained in literature, legends, gossip and mere opinions formed intersubjectively or through traditional media such as radio and television (Meyerowitz, 1985).

In my proposed subjective view of place, the vector of conversation '*with place*' is crucial. This vector pulls the place out of the *human oriented perspective* and allows me to see between the cultural elements, the environmental partner: the biotic non-human beings (animals and plant world) and the geographical environment. Understood in this way, a place becomes not only a matter animated in dialogue with the human, but also a collective entity possessing by nature its rights and the ability to establish and express them. In the dialogue, the place becomes a construct that realizes its own rights and creates impressions and reactions through an active exchange of meanings with other beings of this planet. The vector of conversation '*with place*' is also present as a kind of context, but at the same time as a 'third' partner of the human encounter '*within place*'. The place then becomes the background and actively participates in the meeting. In the practice of everyday life this arrangement, although seemingly simple, becomes a very dynamic field of dialogue between various 'participants'. Vectors '*within place*' and '*about place*' are expanded to include a third aspect of dialogue and the construction of a three-dimensional human world in places. People in place are still important, mediated knowledge relevant, and messages from objects situated in space are meaningful. But perhaps the consequence of the biotic and geographical environment becomes even crucial, and certainly equally significant. Place ceases to be just a cognitive construct created by our

minds. It escapes the limiting and human-oriented framework of perception and inter-subjective mediation and becomes a living construct – more-than-space, place is itself, transcending its materiality described by the term space and creating itself in its own rights. Is place embodied in that case? I would like to avoid that word. In our understanding, embodiment involves the personification of space and place through human behavior, proxemics, and an attempt to create a narrative *oriented-to-human* (Low, 2014). Rather, I would say that place is a partner existing in its own right, referring to nature and the environment. Naturally, also embodied and possessing a man-made sense of place.

Examples of dialogue with a place referring to the third vector can be found quite easily in the so-called natural environment (biotic and geographical). The issue becomes more complex with an increasingly built environment. In this case, indeed, the vectors of conversation '*within place*' and '*about place*' can dominate and influence the relations of dialogue with place, and the dialogue '*with place*' is complemented in part by the material equipment of space that has been placed in it by humans (Duncan, 1990). The development of space will therefore simultaneously '*participate*' in the vectors of communication *about place*, *within place* and *with place*.

In such a case, perhaps it is not so difficult to imagine a conversation with a developed place as to call this conversation the result of the sense of place agency itself. In a sense, a urban built place is a space that loses its power of biotic and geographical expression through the imposition of material content. Naturally, it can also be strengthened in its dialogue with the human being through coherently superimposed material content on biotic and geographical layers.

A place produced or reproduced and put to use, is subject to geographical environmental processes and the influences of time and other people. Its designed shape is changing. The already mentioned palimpsest of signs and meanings is often created. A place developed by planners also begins to live its

own life. And it will not just be a metaphorical life or one related only to social interactions realized in a particular space. The biotic and geographical environment of the place will also participate in this revival (Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006). Add an environment that changes beyond human intention. Suffice it to say that the famous city of Brasilia, an apparent triumph of architecture over space, designed and built according to social principles and the vision of a human creator, has only gained some life at the point, when over the years it has 'gained' years and literally has gained environmental elements. It has been swallowed up by time, climate, greenery, the surrounding geography and of course by human behaviour and interactions. The city, which may be a glaring example of planning intervention, became a living area when it began to breathe on its own in the environmental dimension. Previously it was associated only with spaces that were repulsive, hindering social life and reinforcing negative feelings of the inhabitants (Epstein, 1973; Carvalho, 1991; Spencer, 2010).

Places are progressive and dynamic in their form (Massey, 1994). Their dynamics and representation, however, are shaped not only by the perception of person A and the affects and emotions evoked in that person, but also by the self-determined active conversational actions of the place itself.

## Summary

In the first part of the text I pointed out that in the geographical literature there are increasingly clear attempts to build a scientific discussion around the own-rights of biotic and geographical environments and to weave the agency of place into this thread. At the same time it should be borne in mind that in the juxtaposition of the sociological origin of the notion of agency and the phenomena contained in this context in the geographical reflection, the term becomes distant from its social archetype. On the one hand, it is difficult to literally extend the agency narrative to the biotic and geographical environment.

On the other hand, the biotic and geographical environment is animated matter that interacts with human beings and other entities in accordance with its own rights. Do these relations come down to a system described as: human beings vs. more-than-human beings, and is the agency of place just a kind of variation of the sense of place ascribed to Indigenous Groups? Or more-than-human beings is a simplifying umbrella for the many disparate environmental entities that actually exist in their own rights on our planet and decentralize the human position. In this context, animal and plant personalities are discussed in literature (Hall, 2011). In my view, place also becomes a more-than-space entity through the rights of its own existence and functioning. Exactly like the place functions outside the human being, also in built environment.

Understanding the conversation or dialogue with place helps to explain how the biotic, geographical and build environment surrounding us ceases to be just an environment and becomes one of the partners and conducts an exchange of meanings. This, in turn, provides an opportunity to intellectually, and perhaps operationally and empirically, identify the idea of agency of place and to broaden the conducted discussion, for now, within the Indigenous perspective. The notion of agency can give life to the intellectual discussion in geography conducted around the phenomenon of place, but I recognize that it cannot be a simple linguistic copy. With a creative understanding of the concept, going beyond sociology and psychology, not only can geography gain interesting scientific inspiration, but also the social sciences can seek to expand the sense of agency.

I am convinced that contemporary environmental changes (devastation of the natural and geographical environment) and social changes (dynamically increasing self-consciousness of societies, enormous migrations, development of knowledge about our planet and life on it) lead to the need of redefining basic notions for particular sciences and disciplines, e.g. subjectivity in social sciences, place

in human geography, natural environment in environmental geography. The symmetrical (but not deterministic) treatment of the geographical and natural environment triggers a completely different look at the classical definitions, divisions and classifications.

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Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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