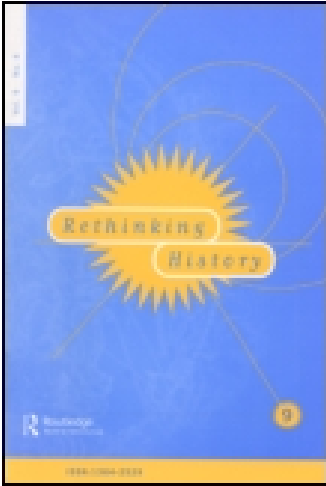


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## COMMENTARIES

# Theory, Experience, and the Motion of History

Thomas Bender

*Philip Ethington's ambitious paper rightly emphasizes the inextricable connection of time and space, making the point that without a sense of space, historians cannot understand their key concern of time. Yet he underplays the importance of experience and more importantly his framing of issues freezes time in space. He emphasizes time and being, but history's concern is being in time, doing in time. The challenge of what he offers is how to give it narrative force and enrich its spatial connections, with one possibility being Actor–Network Theory.*

*Keywords: Border; Boundary; History; Maps; Place; Space*

We should welcome Philip Ethington's reminder that time and space are inextricably linked, whether one's reference is to physics or to social life. One cannot decouple them, yet historians have long since allowed space and place to fall out of their portfolio. With that loss historians, according to Ethington, effectively impoverished their understanding of their discipline's defining concept—time. He seeks to enrich our sense of time and refocus our approach to it. He argues the centrality to historical practice of space and place, muting the usual distinction made between them. Place, the term I prefer and think connotes something importantly distinct from space, is for him literally foundational for the discipline. To build his case, he brings forward an impressive cast of characters from whose work he cobbles together his argument. The list speaks well of his erudition, though perhaps not all of it is required to make his point. While

this impressive firmament of authorities cited doubtless helped him think through the question at hand, exposition need not precisely track the author's own sometimes less than direct journey. It makes his argument somewhat clunky.

As Ethington points out, space re-entered American social science by way of geographers, most notably David Harvey, who brought to the Anglophone world the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Ethington means to carry us beyond Lefebvre, but it is important to remember the French scholar's insistence that each historically contingent 'situation' is located in both time and space (Lefebvre 1996, p. 12). For Ethington, space constructs time, makes it real. But unlike Lefebvre he does not attend to the way time constructs space. There is a mutual constitution that links time and place. If space makes time, time makes place. As Lefebvre puts it, a place is but the 'inscription of time in the world' (Lefebvre 1996, p. 16). A fuller recognition of the mutuality would not weaken his theory but would rather enlarge and enrich it.

Ethington puts together an intellectual cocktail of pragmatism, historicism, and hermeneutics that enables him to move past Lefebvre. He embraces Edward S. Casey's philosophical examination of place, which Ethington says, makes Lefebvre's ideas 'seem obsolete.' Surely that puts the point too strongly, and I am not sure that he needs to reject Lefebvre's notion of abstract space in order to make his larger argument. The real value of Casey's work for him is that it points him toward a way to build space into the historicism of Wilhelm Dilthey. Using Casey to think with enables him to bring together Dilthey's historicism and the spatiality of Georg Simmel.

One of the most striking aspects of Simmel's work is its visuality, which in turn is associated with spatiality. Ethington emphasizes the centrality of 'interaction' in Simmel's account of 'The Stranger,' but he omits consideration of the importance of vision in Simmel's work. The visual character of his analysis of society gives more specificity to the interaction that Ethington stresses. It is a very limited interaction, dependent on sight across space (rather than, say, language). He describes Simmel's conceptualization of this as a linking of metaphorical and geometric space, but the combination is actually—and importantly for Ethington's larger argument, more important than he apparently realizes—a bringing into relation of metaphorical and *experiential* space. (Interestingly, Ethington does not address something nearer the core of Simmel's work: the relation of the subjective self and the objective world, and this omission too, I think, underplays the significance of experience in history and in the theoretical argument he is making.) Moreover, experience is the tie to pragmatism, a

linkage Ethington seems to value. It is also central to his extension of Simmel's work, particularly when he develops Casey's notion that 'a place is more an *event* than a *thing*.' Actually, it is a conjuncture of events operating along axes supplied by time, about which I will comment further below. Still this sustains Ethington's insistence that 'we can find *all human phenomena originally arising in and from places*. It is time to recognize that history must be about those places if it aspires to recount the past' (italics in original).

Because history's actors are, whatever else they are, material beings who must stand in a place, history as the emplotment of human time cannot be separated from place. Here is the crucial material grounding that Ethington contributes to contemporary theory, so much of which has escaped the material world into culture and discourse. Hence the importance, as he explains it, of his claim to be offering a neo-foundational theory. The unavoidable placeness of human life and activity brings history literally down to earth. Although humans, unlike plants, do not have roots, they cannot exist without having a material platform on which to stand—and the products of cultivating that platform are equally essential. It is the most basic and compelling of materialist foundations. But it is not, as he claims, new, for it is akin to the materialist base of the human for Marx.

Ethington's inadequate address to experience is important in another way. In this essay he has a tendency to freeze history. But the task of the historian is to describe, explain, and interpret human action. His distance from this consideration is evident in his otherwise insightful examination of the etymology of key words, most notably 'present.' He explains that 'to be present' once meant the same thing as 'to be in the present.' It is a nice point and good for his argument. But his elaboration of this point fails to take into account what this merging of time and place omits: the mobility of history. History is more than presence; more than time and being. It is about being and doing. The word 'narrative,' which offers a rhetoric of motion, rarely shows up in his account.

This weakness in his notion of a spatializing theory of historical practice is clearest at the culmination of his argument, when he assimilates history to mapping, to cartography. 'I am claiming,' he writes, 'that the incalculable volume of historical writing on all subjects should be thought of as a map because the past can only be known by placing it, and the way of knowing places is to map them.' The problem with cartography as history is the same as the difficulty with former mayor David Dinkins' metaphor for multicultural New York, when he called the city 'a beautiful mosaic.' A 'mosaic' lacks motion. It is made up of many pieces, but they do not move, and they are not subject to rearrangement. While the metaphor of the

mosaic makes diversity a whole, it stops history. The metaphor of a map has the same limitation. Places do not move around, but history makers do.

The history of a place is the working out of a multitude of contingently converging histories. Indeed, the historian's task is to determine those contingencies, establishing or ruling out convergences. But these histories are all in motion (at very different speeds and scales, as Braudel made clear) and history is constructed out of their impact on each other in a place, that point of convergence. I think Ethington may have had something like this in mind with his passing comment that places are 'collective phenomena.' In *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II* Braudel explored three structures of time, but elsewhere in more theoretical writing he emphasized that history is the sum of a potentially infinite number of histories that come together and constitute a place—a city, a sea, a nation, an empire, even a person (Braudel 1973). Thus the crucial role of narrative in the spatialized understanding of history that Ethington is proposing. He recognizes the tension, but not the significance, between narrative and cartography: 'Cartography's infinitely possible figurations cannot be reduced to narrative form.' Yes, but the unremarked but crucial point is that without narrative history is denied motion. He does not realize the kind of problem cartography poses because his thinking underplays the active experience of time and space, the centrality of human action to the meaning of history. In what is unfortunately only a passing remark Ethington glimpses a possible solution. He suggests that perhaps instead of 'cartography' he should say 'choreography.' I would urge just that. In that image there are possibilities worth pursuing. In some sense that is precisely the charge made to historians by Braudel, when he suggests that the historian's history is the sum of many histories, woven together in a narrative.<sup>1</sup>

At the very end of his essay Ethington makes a much too brief but very bold statement about the implications of his materialist approach. 'Placing the past,' he writes, 'recognizes no boundary between natural and human inquiry.' There are various ways one might interpret this statement, but it brings the non-human into the narrative of history. His intention is to make the materiality of space more than a platform of history. He succeeds in that, but one might even go farther. Had he devoted more attention to *acting* in time and space, he might have been prompted to ask whether the non-human might be an actor in history, a part of a chain of causation or the conditions of enablement.

For someone like me, or Ethington, scholars who have devoted much of our work to teaching and research related to cities, this extension of the causal chain seems obvious. Consider the case of New Orleans at the time

of Katrina, which has, or ought to have, alerted historians to the interconnection of the human and non-human elements of a causal chain. Writing in the wake of that disaster, Stephen Graham points out that ‘the “natural” world mingles inseparably with the urban world. Increasingly it is impossible to separate the natural world from the man-made one of cities, infrastructures, and technologies’ (Graham 2006).<sup>2</sup> William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* makes this point (Cronon 1991); it also demonstrates, *avant la lettre*, a technique of social inquiry that dissolves the category of the social, replacing it with heterogeneous chains of actors over space. This approach has come to be theorized by sociologists—most notably the French social scientists Bruno Latour and Michel Callon—as Actor–Network Theory (ANT).<sup>3</sup> Within the field of social studies of science this approach, which is still evolving and contested at many points, emphasizes networks of causation that are quite heterogeneous, including non-human as well as human actors. Critiques have been made of the politics of the method, or the absence of politics or normative judgment.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on a single actor or even a group of human actors, ANT looks to what I would call (though they do not) an ensemble of enabling circumstances. Every element in the ensemble (or network) is essential to explaining the change; it might be called collaborative causation, a collaboration of human and non-human actors. Beyond offering a way to develop Ethington’s suggestion that the distinction separating human and non-human might be set aside for certain forms of analysis, I raise this because networks, if you accept them, make place more complex.

A historian of the city, especially the modern city, ought to have considered more than Ethington has the boundaries of place and their permeability. Cities are the place-specific precipitate of historical time, something most clearly evident in their layers of materiality. But they are also involved in translocal networks, whether of markets or ideas or of people and things. Not only does the city lack firm or definite boundaries, but this quality is central to their very being. The city is not bounded; its function is to be a nodal connection of peoples, things, and ideas, and that demands open borders. This makes place extend into space, but not randomly and not abstractly. Networks are pathways of connection, making a given city a global actor, while at the same time its history—its local change over time—is significantly shaped by forces beyond its placeness, its municipal boundaries or any other purely material definition of its boundaries.

My point with these closing comments is not to press Ethington in this particular direction, but it is to point out to his readers that he has

established a proposition worth thinking with. There is a beckoning incompleteness in his place-oriented materialist approach to history. He has opened up important space for thinking about ways to reconnect history and geography, time and space. Whether or not one follows Ethington's lead, one much appreciates that he emphasizes the importance of that reconnection, a reconnection that will reflect the intellectual culture of our own time. Historical explanation is dependent on both axes of time and space. Our work at its most basic is to explain an event by locating it in time and place. Both are always part of the contextual practice of historical scholarship.

### Notes

- [1] Paul Ricoeur is insightful on Braudel and narrative, arguing that his great work, *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*, is in fact a narrative history (Ricoeur 1984, I, pp. 95–110, 206–225).
- [2] Graham's more fully developed theory of the urban environment reaches well beyond this to novel political understandings of privatization and infrastructure (Graham & Marvin 2001).
- [3] Actor–Network Theory is very much a moving target, and both Callon and Latour have at various times been critics and revisers. However, Latour has recently published a good current summary (Latour 2005).
- [4] Latour (2005) addresses this issue, without success, I think. My own address to this problem (Bender 2006) rejects the tendency of ANT to homogenize the heterogeneity he celebrates, a move that devalues one of the theory's central innovations.

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