Spatial representations of territories and the world: mental images of teachers and pupils

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MENTAL IMAGES OF TEACHERS AND PUPILS

SPATIAL REPRESENTATIONS

OF TERRITORIES

AND THE WORLD

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What is the nature of relations between the inhabitant, the citizen, their country and the space of others? Are these relations to territory rational or do they stem from links that are unconscious or repressed in the memory of peoples? In short, how is knowledge about one's country and that of others built? History and geography teaching greatly contributes to this quest for identity by proposing, in rational terms, political, social and spatial frameworks. In Jodelet's view, 'We always need to know where we stand in relation to the world which surrounds us. We must adapt to it, live in it, master it physically or intellectually, and identify and resolve the problems that it poses. This is why we create representations' (1989, p. 31).

A knowledge of these social and individual constructs, these blueprints of the real world, is clearly of great concern to historians and geographers. These constructs provide a better understanding of the concepts, images, symbols and values that a society attaches to its territory and uses in its relationship with others. Learning to live together is, above all, learning to understand others and their spatial representations.

The processes involved in constructing space

After concentrating for many years on models of society, history and geography are now taking an interest in models of homo sapiens. This new approach—based on actors (teachers, pupils and others), their experience, their behaviour and hence their subjectivity—involves a major epistemological change. It constitutes a break with an objectivist tradition which looked for classifications and structures, and

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A biographical note about the authors will be found on pages 195 and 203.

for which the individual was merely homo economicus, homo rationalis or homo roboticus—the classical models of homo sapiens.

It is to enhance understanding of spatial representations that geography grapples with the processes involved in constructing divisions in space and building identity. These processes are the outcome of a multitude of decisions taken by individuals (ranging from the politician to the consumer choosing where to live) on the basis of a system of representations. Such spatial constructs are to be interpreted as a dynamic balance in which representations constitute the driving force.

These spatial representations reveal space as it is experienced, used and felt by the inhabitants. It is a territory, shaped by human beings, and projecting images onto them. ‘It is at this level that the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘territory’ take on their meaning—more than the material form of the social organization of space, a territory is a vector of ideologies, symbolic representations and also the unconscious’ (Bailly et al., 1991, p. 21). To confuse these two kinds of space—namely that which emanates from legal and economic concepts, and territory which originates in the sense of belonging to a group—is tantamount to introducing functionalist models that present a reductionist image of society. In fact, space becomes territory when it is charged with meaning, not in the ‘top-down’ but in the ‘bottom-up’ sense created by the societies and people who organize and live in it. Understanding territories is to find the meaning or rather the different meanings which can overlap or confront one another.

Four founding principles

This actor-based approach is built on four founding principles:

1. It consists in ‘delving’ beneath the divisions of the traditional world. Assuming that what matters is not merely a knowledge of the structure of the territory but also of the way in which it was formed, it analyses the processes that led to the spatial decisions taken by the different groups and individuals making up society.

2. Space is not regarded as a mere setting upon which the life of society is inscribed; it is both a product of that society and an integral part of it—space cannot be conceived independently of the people who use it, develop it and live in it.

3. Human beings, whether as simple individuals or as individuals in society, are regarded as spatial actors: by their feelings, decisions and actions, they are constantly engaged in shaping the environment. In this way men and women enter into the scientific analysis.

4. Spatial practices are only very rarely the expression of perfect economic rationality and complete information, because knowledge of space, whether implicit or explicit, is fundamentally subjective—the mediation of cognitive processes intervenes between individuals and their surroundings. In short, what counts is the world as it is perceived, judged, valued, interiorized and reformulated by the actors and not the world as it is institutionalized.

A knowledge of knowledge

We still have to understand precisely what spatial representations are and the way in which they circulate in a society. Representations are treated as both a process and a product. As a process, representations make it possible to understand the way of thinking of the actors, to grasp the interplay of individual aspirations and the value systems of social groups and, ultimately, to reveal the life of territories. As a product, representations provide keys to the way in which evolutions and social and spatial transformations operate. These spatial representations are not the bare facts of which 'reality' is composed, but a four-tiered mental construct.

- They are to be understood as constructs of (spatial) reality formulated by the actors. These representations can bring into being what they postulate, and produce the objective reality to which some thinkers oppose them, or, as P. Bourdieu nearly expresses it: 'the representations that social agents form of the divisions of reality contribute to the reality of the divisions' (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 145). Hence a knowledge of representations can become a key factor in that we can influence the social world by influencing the knowledge that agents have of this world.

- They are not true or false (in the positivist sense); they are relevant to varying degrees and are either transformed into practices or acts, or not. 'We have chosen to study 'objectively' the 'subjectivity' of the actors. What they say and what they repeat, and the judgements that they pass, do not indicate that their remarks are 'true', i.e. fair, accurate and well-founded. They are merely constructs of reality formulated by the actors; they become 'true' because they are transformed into practices' (Dubet, 1991, p. 16).

- These representations are to be found in the productions, documents and utterances (whether spontaneous or solicited, e.g. questionnaires, interviews, drawings) of the actors. But we discover only part of them, inevitably truncated, or their complexity and their contradictions.

- These spatial representations are produced by those who analyse the way of thinking of individuals. It is researchers, and researchers alone, who create and formulate the product that the representation becomes. We must therefore dispense with the naive but still widespread notion that spatial representations are carefully stored away in the minds of individuals, ready for use, and can be consulted like an archive. Hence, geography is 'a knowledge (a representation formulated by geographers) of knowledge (the way in which societies and people transcribe in images their experience of the environment)' (Bailly et al., 1991, p. 21). History, according to this approach, is also a knowledge of knowledge of the practices of societies at different times, these practices evolving in the same way as the divisions of the world.

To adopt this approach is not without difficulty; the study of subjectivity, as noted by P. Bourdieu, gives rise to misunderstandings and resistance:

The reasons for the spontaneous hostility of 'scholars' to 'subjective' criteria would merit lengthy analysis: there is naive realism that tends to discount everything that cannot be seen or touched; there is economism that tends to recognize no other determinants of social action than those visibly inscribed in the material conditions of existence [...]; finally and above all, there is the scientific point of honour that impels observers to multiply the signs of their rejection of common-sense representations, thereby condemning themselves to a reductionist objectivism totally incapable of incorporating the realities of everyday representations in the scientific representation of reality (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 145).

From personal representations to cultural representations

Within a given space and a given group, there are three categories of representations which are characterized by their mode of production, the number of users and their life span (Sperber, 1989). Personal representations are produced by an individual, who is also their user, and are therefore mental representations. They reflect a process of acquiring knowledge, since knowing something means assimilating it, i.e. going through a process of interpretation and construction of reality. This is a constantly functioning process, sometimes active, sometimes dormant, providing a real link with the outside world. If the mental representation is communicated, it becomes a public representation which has reached a certain level of conceptualization. These representations circulate within the social group and may be adopted by several users. Production and use are separate processes. Some representations are ephemeral and soon disappear, whereas others are preserved for a long time and become part of the social 'know-how' which other authors call common sense.

Eventually, if the representations are widely distributed within a social group and establish themselves durably within it, they become cultural representations and are mentally assimilated by everyone. They are sometimes related to ideologies: 'the actors have an ideology. They form a representation of a situation, which is always a set of social relations, from their own point of view and reinterpret as the background to their intentions what is in fact a relation of which they are one of the terms' (Touraine, 1973, p. 332). Some actors may deliberately produce representations in order to influence existing representations—these are the pressure or action groups whose purpose is to bring into being what they postulate.

This state of permanent production of representations means that the social group has thousands of representations at its disposal, which circulate among individuals, enabling them to construct their own mental vision of the world. In his connection, Sperber uses the image of an epidemiology of representations, by analogy with the transmission of diseases. There are references to the endemic state of certain representations or the epidemic nature of others.

Spatial representations of territories and the world

This analysis leads Sperber (1989, p. 128) to identify two fields of study:
- the psychological explanation: a genuine psychological study of the processes involved in the formulation of representations, prior to speech;
- the epidemiological study: analysis of the distribution of representations in the social group.

It is obviously the second approach to representations which is developed by history and geography. The facts which these disciplines explain are distributions of representations. Hence the concept of spatial representation involves ‘analysis of the spatial images which pupils, teachers and researchers carry and transmit [...]’. It also helps to make pupils and teachers more aware of the diversity of the spatial representations formulated by individuals and social groups sharing a single space’ (Bailly and Debarbieux, 1991, p. 157).

New educational approaches

Acquiring one’s own sense of belonging and becoming aware of that of others, lead us beyond the field of objective and rational knowledge. Historical, emotional and symbolic links explain people’s attachment to their territories. History and geography, which play a key role in training, can no longer ignore knowledge of people’s own representations and of those of others. These representations are everywhere: in textbooks, in the choices and discourse of teachers, in the minds of pupils and in the fabric of society. This is why our project centred on two main objectives:
- to understand the educational role of history and geography through study of the concepts transmitted by primary- and secondary-school textbooks;
- to identify educational needs through investigation (analysis of texts, mental maps, a survey) of the spatial representations of pupils and teachers in three countries: Lebanon, the Czech Republic and El Salvador.

The first results, outlined in the texts below, show that spatial representations are a powerful tool, a genuine heuristics, enabling us to understand human spatial thinking and to construct, beyond structural history and geography, a history and geography based on actors whose complex behaviour is made clear. Learning to live together is no easy task: the formulation of new educational approaches, whose purpose is to know one’s own knowledge and that of others, may help us to meet the needs of the future society which we are all called upon to share.

References

