

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Bernd Belina**, *Raum*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013. ISBN: 978-3-89691-682-2

When the journal *Geographische Revue* published papers by Neil Smith and David Harvey in 2001, the editor commented on the fact that, contrary to the situation in the Anglophone world, Marxism had not yet arrived in the discussions of academic geographers in German-speaking countries. He also remarked that in publishing the issue, entitled ‘Marxism in Geography’, the intention was not to develop a Marxian version of geography, or Marxian versions of ‘space’ or ‘the man and nature relationship’. Instead, it was to demonstrate how a focus on the relations of production and forms of political dominance can help explain certain social facts. It does not come as a surprise that the editor of this specific issue was Bernd Belina. At the time, there would hardly have been anybody else available for the task. 12 years later the traditional concept of ‘geodeterminism’, *i.e.* the assumption that the physical character of a region, landscape or country determines social, economic and political forms as well as particular national characteristics, though still prevalent in textbooks for international management, is rarely advocated in academic geography. There is, however, still a strong trend of discourse analysis, which rather than explaining the constitution of social, economic and political forms *as such* focuses on the meanings attributed to them through discourse. And there is the strong impact of the so-called ‘spatial turn’ in the social sciences internationally since the 1980s. Nevertheless, Marxist concepts and analyses are no longer seen as somewhat exotic in German geography. Writings and editions by Belina have decisively contributed to this change. Publishing *Raum* in a series called ‘Einstiege’ (‘Entrances’) demonstrates the conviction of its author that the time has come to write a Marxist introduction to the academic discipline of geography.

And, indeed, *Raum* is not one of those introductions to an academic discipline which confronts the reader with various theoretical conceptions. Instead, this small book presents us with a well-reasoned outline of historical-geographical materialism. While the title may suggest a reference to the spatial turn, the author explains that historical materialist

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conceptions do not conceive of spaces as given entities, but - while not denying the relevance of physical materiality - analyze the social constitution of different forms of space.

Belina starts out by explaining those theoretical concepts of historical materialism which he is making use of. I am not quite convinced that his introductory chapter is necessary, because Belina's understanding of 'society', 'abstraction', 'dialectics, *etc.* does become sufficiently clear in the following chapters and I, for one, usually refrain from returning to the explanations of terms once I have started to follow an argument. But, of course, others may find them helpful.

In order to explain how 'space' should be integrated into critical materialist theory, Belina first of all distinguishes historical-geographical materialism from vulgar materialism on the one side and idealistic conceptions of space on the other. Vulgar materialism assumes the physical materiality of certain spaces to be the cause of certain forms of social reality - an assumption prevalent in geography until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In criticizing these concepts some have been led to deny any physical materiality of space and suggest that it has no reality outside of discourses and ascribed significances. Not wanting to repeat either of these erroneous conceptions, historical-geographical materialism has struggled with an analytical paradox. It rejects the autonomous nature of spaces but stresses the relevance of the spatial aspects of social practices. Of course, since any social practice has to take place somewhere, the emphasis on its spatial aspects would not offer more than a banality. But historical-geographical materialist analysis is not focused on the spatial aspects of social practices as such, but on the content of social practices.

It is the content of social practices that constitutes specific spaces and thus the preconditions for future practice. Their agents appropriate the spatial form which has been constituted by preceding social practices, thereby reconstituting as well as changing it. This analytical conception becomes quite clear when Belina explains how 'territories', 'scales', 'places' and 'networks' do not exist as such, but rather are constantly constituted and reproduced through 'territorializing', 'scaling', 'place making' and 'networking, *i.e.* through specific social practices. Scales, for example, are interpreted as the result of confrontations

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and strategies which led to compromises. If these are consolidated through lawmaking, administrative practice and/or prolonged usage, certain scales – for example the federalist structure of the German state or decentralized wage-bargaining in the USA – tend to be taken as given. Scale jumping, for example, from the federalist to the European level of politics, can then open up new possibilities for strategies, thereby also rendering previous scales flexible. But it is the application of the critique of the conception of scale as an entity to the debate on globalization which most clearly demonstrates its advantage. Because one could only arrive at the conclusion that globalization leads to the decline of (the relevance of) nation states if one conceived of states and global relations as being located on scales in the context of a hierarchical structure. This simple picture of a hierarchy of scales breaks down as soon as one starts to look for practices which are referred to in debates on either regionally, nationally or globally oriented strategies. Hence, the expectation of a decline of the nation state can be explained as having been derived from the erroneous conception of spatial forms.

Since the spatial turn, not only scales but also networks have become a favorite topic of social scientists. And, indeed, any network is the combination of institutions or agents which are spread over distances. But, once again, Belina points to the dangers of conceiving of networks as spatial forms which exist independently of their content. Because networking comprises not only strategies of inclusion towards certain agents and/or institutions but also, at the same time, strategies of exclusion. And it is the content of any strategy of networking that decides who might be included and who should definitely be excluded. Of course, these strategies may change, but any such change does not come about through the dynamics of a network but through the change of strategies.

One more example. While it is widely known that the development of modern territorial states was the result of wars and diplomacy, these practices of ‘territorializing’ have been so successful that, today, the state tends to be conceived of as a territorially defined legal personality. Marxists, on the other hand, conceive of states in capitalist societies as the institutional center of complex social relations. One could leave it at that, but Belina explains that political practice tends to make the erroneous abstraction ‘the state’ real in the sense of

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causally effective. (The author uses the German 'wahr' in the philosophical sense of 'true'.) And, indeed, in developing economic policy as a means to internationally compete against other states as well as in acquiring armaments in order to be able to defend or enlarge their territory, (the governments of) capitalist states transform the erroneous abstraction which conceives of states as territorial entities into truth.

Belina's analytical conception of 'erroneous abstractions made real/causally effective/true through social practice' constitutes an achievement for historical-geographical materialism. By illustrating the relevance of this analytical concept not only for the practice of territorializing and scaling but also of networking, place making as well as mapping, he demonstrates the extent of insights which can be derived from historical-geographical materialism. Belina's book is a theoretical achievement in its own right. But it also offers a knowledgeable introduction to the concepts of Lefebvre and Harvey, the two founding fathers of materialist conceptions of space, as well as to recent debates on forms of space. Belina succeeds in explaining complicated concepts quite clearly, and he possesses the rare skill of communicating with his readers. His examples from everyday life experiences help to elucidate theoretical contexts and more often than not he even manages to be witty. Who else, for example, would tell us that a certain theory, though being quite erroneous, is, nevertheless, quite harmless. Remarks like these, however, also make it clear that Belina does not understand his attempt at furthering the development of a theory of the spatial economy of capitalism as a purely academic pursuit. Instead, he explains how scale jumping, networking or any other form of conscious spacial practice can become an integral part of strategies which aim at changing the conditions for political practices, and thereby for the everyday practices of life.

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(Historical and Modern Trends in the Development of Design). TEXT 1. Industrial Design in Pre-Industrial Societies. Vocabulary and Grammar Exercises. Eighteenth-century concern with visual style led to the issue of numerous pattern-books for the guidance of furniture-makers and their patrons. It would, however, be idle to pretend that there are no differences between eighteenth-century design attitudes and our own. The eighteenth-century household possessed many fewer machines than a contemporary one, and these machines were often of a type now completely obsolete. Eighteenth-century designers produced a wide range of precision instruments for various purposes. They were of considerable complexity. The historical or genealogical classification, groups of languages in accordance with their origin is from a common linguistic ancestor. Genetically, English belongs to the Germanic or Teutonic group of languages, which is one of the twelve groups of the IE linguistic family. Most of the area of Europe and large parts of other continents are occupied today by the IE languages, Germanic being one of their major groups. Historical materialism, also known as the materialist conception of history, is a methodology used by some communist and Marxist historiographers that focuses on human societies and their development through history, arguing that history is the result of material conditions rather than ideals. This was first articulated by Karl Marx (1818–1883) as the "materialist conception of history". It is principally a theory of history which asserts that the material conditions of a society's mode of production Historical-Machinic Materialism. In the British Footsteps of the Prophet. Learning from Bogdanov. At the same time, culture and information are not limited to the economy, but sublate the economy and take effect all over society. In the book Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media (2015), I ground the Marxist study of communication and digital media in Raymond Williams's cultural materialism for reconceptualising the relationship of culture and economy or of "base" and "superstructure". How does audience labour function on social media?