

ON SPACE AS A CAPACITY

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This article is about space and social relationships. More precisely, it is about the space of and in social relationships. It is also about the efficacy of social relationships in segregating their own contexts of meaning and value. The article also addresses the question of how agency comes about. This 'coming about' of agency, its swelling and appearance in a structure of meaning, is what I call 'capacity'. Social relationships have 'capacity'. That is, they have both spaciousness and potency. They accomplish things, and accomplish things 'somewhere'. In this respect, space (or the capacity of social relationships) is something very different from idioms that we have come to think of as forms of space, like landscape or place. This article is also, therefore, a critique of the way in which some anthropologists have recently theorized landscape and place. My argument is based on an ethnographic account of the dimensions through which people construct urban space in the Chilean city of Antofagasta.

What happens when people's identity is not land-related? When a land holds no values, no memories, no history for the people that inhabit it? In the city of Antofagasta, Chile, people say that they live in a 'moment of fugue'. They refer to the city as a *campamento minero*, a mining encampment: a place where 'people come to make money, and then they leave'. The city is also known for being dirty, and its inhabitants are often heard complaining that 'people behave as if they did not live here'. In Antofagasta, social relationships are not anchored in the land, for the land is no 'place' for them. The place of social relationships is not the territory where they unfold, but a different space.

In this article I explore some of the ways in which the people of Antofagasta fabricate spaces in order to seek refuge from a territory that they deride. The city is located in the desert of Atacama, which is celebrated for being the driest desert on earth. The desert is also celebrated for its hidden mineral wealth. The people of Antofagasta are grateful to the desert for this, but they also express contempt for the territory because of its harshness, isolation, and lack of history. It is not unusual to hear people describing or referring to the desert by insulting it: *pampa del carajo* (damned desert). The relationship that the people of Antofagasta have with the city and, historically, with the desert, is one of surmounting or seeking to overcome the limiting structures that their environment has imposed and continues to impose on them.

My present purpose is to illustrate some of the forms that these strategies of surmounting have taken, and thus to describe some of the efforts that the people of Antofagasta have made to invest their city with value and meaning. In the context of everyday life in Antofagasta, value stands today, broadly, for a concern with issues of healthcare and cleanliness, family life, and the well-being of children. What is

significant about these is that their pursuit is often explained by the need to create spaces of action and meaning that annihilate and supplant the looming and omnipresent power of the desert. In this context, space is envisaged as a necessary extension of, and corollary to, the production of value. Space is a showcase for practices that seek recreation and entertainment, healthfulness and safety. It is therefore a dimension and form of agency – a capacity.¹

The view of space that I present here differs considerably from that which is current in anthropological theory today. A word about this current state of affairs is therefore in order.

The grounded spaces of anthropology: landscapes, places, fields

In recent years there has been a burgeoning of anthropological interest in the subjects of landscape and place (see e.g. Bender 1993; Feld & Basso 1996; Flint & Morphy 2000; Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995; Miller, Jackson, Thrift, Holbrook & Rowlands 1998; Rodman 1992). This reaction has been part of the wider 'spatial turn' in the social sciences, a trend inspired in no small measure by the important advances and perspectives developed in the field of geography. The geographers' view of the subject, which I discuss more fully below, quickly developed into a concern with issues of representation, discussions on space thereby taking an epistemological-cum-ontological direction (see e.g. Crang & Thrift 2000; Massey 1999; Soja 1996; Thrift 1996). For the time being, however, I focus on anthropology and how the discipline, being more concerned with and attentive to social processes, turned its mind to the relationship of people to land. Anthropologists grounded their discussions on space, and they did so through the idioms of place and landscape. This was in part a consequence of the discipline's Durkheimian legacy. Durkheim viewed space as a mode of classifying otherwise homogeneous and undifferentiated territories. For Durkheim, space was an *a priori* category of meaning. It was an intellectual tool used by societies to bestow meaning on the world. In his own words:

Spatial representation consists essentially in a primary co-ordination of the data of sensuous experience. But this co-ordination would be impossible if the parts of space were qualitatively equivalent and if they were really interchangeable ... That is to say that space could not be what it is if it were not ... divided and differentiated ... *All these distinctions evidently come from the fact that different sympathetic values have been attributed to various regions* (Durkheim 1915: 9–11, emphasis added).

In this famous passage from *The elementary forms of the religious life*, Durkheim affords a 'sociological' reworking of Kantian rationalism (Gell 1992) and very subtly equates space with the organization of sensuous experience, with the empiricism of Nature. This is most dramatically enforced when he talks of space as a form of classifying regions, a notion of superlative territorial connotations. Space is territory, if only a territory that has been made intelligible by the action of a social intellect.

The Durkheimian approach to space had a pervasive influence on anthropology (see e.g. Ardener 1981; Douglas 1966; Humphrey 1974; Lévi-Strauss 1963; 1966). My argument here is that, although Durkheim's approach is often assumed to have

been discredited by what are now referred to as 'theories of practice' (Bhaskar 1979; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984), it has actually survived in a concealed form in contemporary discussions of space and spatial practices. As will be seen below, space, in anthropology, has been treated as, or equated to, a Durkheimian 'region' – that is, a territory or, to use more recent idioms, a place or landscape. It is this view of space that lies at the root of the recent preoccupation with the 'siting' of culture, a topic of particular concern for transnationalist researchers (Clifford 1997; Gupta & Ferguson 1997a; 1997b; Olwig & Hastrup 1997). Take, for example, Arjun Appadurai's analysis of our contemporary world-in-flux:

The landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscapés – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no *longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or culturally homogeneous* ... what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world? (Appadurai 1991: 191, 196; emphasis added).

Appadurai's remarks pose an interesting set of research questions but I think that they also make an uncritical theoretical assumption, this being that space and territory are one and the same thing. This is something that has been taken on board by most commentators and analysts of the transnationalist school. This assumption is all the more damaging in so far as transnationalist researchers assume that they have established a sufficiently strong categorical distinction between place and space. 'Place' is the geographical idiom with which earlier generations of anthropologists represented territorially demarcated, culturally bounded, and neatly enclosed societies. 'Space', on the contrary, is a 'field of relations' (Olwig & Hastrup 1997); that is, the shifting constellation of social relationships through which 'places' are activated as they are practised and brought to life. In the work of James Clifford, for instance, the infinite malleability of space is understood as a topography of 'routes', a geography of journeys and displacements, conceptually opposed to the immobile cultural setting that anthropologists used to think with in order to bring social relationships to life (Clifford 1997). The view of space as 'activated places' owes a great deal to Michel de Certeau (1984), and not a few of the anthropologists who have been contributing to the spatial literature have acknowledged this (Clifford 1997: 53-4; Olwig & Hastrup 1997: 4).

Similar premisses can be seen in recent studies of the material dimensionality of social practices (e.g. Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zuñiga's work on 'house lives' [1999]) and the anthropology of urban spaces and urban built environments (e.g. Low 1996). In all these studies, space is the outcome of referential practices, whereby people 'refer' to the material and built world around them in multifarious and varying ways. These authors do vest actors with space-making capacities, but ultimately circumscribe these to the material base of the world they inhabit.² Similarly, authors such as Henrietta Moore (1996) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977) use the word 'space' to mean 'spatial order' and 'the organization of space' (indeed, both authors use these terms); yet the idea of the 'organization of space' presupposes space as a category, one, for that matter, whose ontological attributes are characteristically territorial. Not to mention, of course, the aforementioned body of work on landscape and place, whose ultimate, ineluctable terminus, no matter how elegantly and efficaciously woven by social relationships, has always been a territory.

My concern with all such approaches is to do with the Durkheimian gaze that underlines and undermines them. They all, in different ways, confound space with territory, with a 'location', in Gupta and Ferguson's preferred terminology (1997*b*). This location is woven in various ways by social relationships, true; but it is always taken to be somewhere. Put somewhat differently, they all see sociality as stretching through and unfolding in space – sometimes a bounded space, that is, a place; sometimes a translocal, unbounded territory. But space, be it a house, a region, or a transnational corridor, is always the setting where social relationships take 'place'. In other words, space is taken to be a given, irreducible ontological category; the (geographical) framework of action; and social relationships are seen as something exterior to and distinct from the setting where they take 'place', no matter how this setting is thereafter signified or constructed. The implication of this is that anthropologists have responded to Foucault's call for the 'desanctification' or temporalization of space (1986: 23), that is, to the need to conceptualize the flux of people's life situations by putting people, not their life worlds, in motion.³

This concern with putting people on the move comes as something of a surprise. For it is surely the case that "‘natives’ who stay put in a particular area' move as much as those people who suffer displacement or are engaged in long distance migration. The difference lies not in people's movement (people have always moved; what is different now is the scale of their movements) but in people's relationships with one another as they move. New forms of relationships bring about new values, as well as new ways to express and deploy those values. New structures and dimensions of meaning are therefore mobilized in an attempt to come to terms with the changing life situations. What this means is that the spatiality of people's actions (their taskscapes or valuescapes, if you will),⁴ changes because their social relationships change. It is not that people are now (theoretically) moving but that we are now, following geography's epistemological-cum-ontological representational breakthrough, conceptualizing space as capable of changing. Space is no longer a category of fixed and given ontological attributes, but a becoming, an emerging property of social relationships. Put somewhat differently, social relationships are inherently spatial, and space an instrument and dimension of people's sociality. Social life is no longer to be seen as unfolding through space but with space, that is, spatially. Space is no longer 'out there', but a condition or faculty – a capacity – of social relationships. It is what people do, not where they are.

What people do: an ontology of becomings

As was noted above, my aim is to undertake an ontological redefinition of the concept of space, building particularly on the ways in which recent work in geography has led to a reconsideration of the ontological nature of space. This has often been carried out as part of the wider theoretical enterprise of developing 'non-representational' models of the world. Non-representational schools of thought

deny the efficacy of representational models of the world, whose main focus is the 'internal', and whose basic terms or objects are symbolic representations, and are instead committed to non-representational models of the world, in which the focus is 'external', and in which basic terms and objects are forged in a manifold of actions and interactions (Thrift 1996: 6).

Non-representational thinking is thus concerned with ‘presentations’, or how social life is instantiated. It is concerned with

the ‘play’ of appearance unfolding before us, such that, instead of seeing the events concerned in terms of theories as to what they supposedly ‘represent’, we see them ‘relationally’ – that is, we see them practically, as being embedded in networks of possible connections and relations with their surroundings, ‘pointing toward’ the (proper) roles they might actually play in our lives (Thrift 1997: 126).

This I find particularly apposite to the work of ethnography, whose intellectual project I see as that of establishing (that is, describing) the concatenation of ‘presentations’ that make up social life. In fact, to elucidate further the tenets of the non-representational school, I turn now to the work of the anthropologist Nancy Munn, whose views on space are not too distant from, and indeed were almost anterior to, those that are now in vogue amongst geographers.⁵ Writing on inter-island *kula* transactions in Papua New Guinea, and the micro-historical and symbolic processes of which they are a part, Munn says:

... for the subject a regional world is not given, but lived ... Instead of considering the formation of a regional order through the structure and functioning of given social forms such as types of social organisation, exchange or communication, I am concerned with its ongoing formation in certain experiential syntheses that actors create in practices, and the events that transpire in their terms (Munn 1990: 2).

Munn’s aim is thus to understand the ways in which specific spatio-temporal practices create ‘moments’ of social experience through which the ‘present’ is fabricated as a regional world.⁶ Her argument is that the spatial framework of an actor’s practices keeps shifting and realigning itself to the orientation, horizon, and deployment of the practices themselves. That is, practices make spaces, and these transpire and come into existence as spatio-temporal ‘events’ (or ‘presentations’, in the jargon of non-representational theory). For Munn, therefore, the structure of space (her ‘regional worlds’) is event-like or practice-like.

What Munn and the non-representational theorists are therefore telling us is that the world is not a known place that exists prior to our engagements with it. On the contrary, the world happens with us and, in choosing what set of practices we will enact and engage in, we are also choosing what world we want to live in. Through our engagements with and in the world, we become the spaces to which we have invested our practices.

The new ontology of becomings owes a great deal to Heidegger’s philosophy. Heidegger is also behind Tim Ingold’s dwelling perspective on place, understood as the process of inhabitation of a landscape (Ingold 2000). But instead of focusing on the activities of dwelling, which are again based on the existence of a given, existing territory (the Durkheimian region), the non-representationalists opt for a reading of Heidegger that emphasizes his view of agency as ‘worldling’ (Heidegger 1997; 1999). Here, the emphasis is on Heidegger’s understanding of being-in-the-world not as a disengaged subject but rather as ‘an average *mode of comportment*, a skilful coping which consists of a shared readiness to deal “appropriately” with people and things’ (Thrift 1996: 11). The word that Heidegger employs to denote such an average mode of comportment is *Ereignis*, which could be translated as something like ‘a becoming-of-seizures’, or ‘a becoming-of-appropriations’

(Heidegger 1999). This leaves 'space' as the dimension of every moment of engagement, of every 'presentation'.

The general project of producing a geography of 'becomings', of mapping social processes as deployments of 'presentations', responds to an old concern of the social sciences, namely, to account for and explain social change and historical transformations. The geographers' response to this theoretical conundrum has been to open space to time:

The concept of space for which I want to argue is one that holds that space is open and dynamic. That is ... 'space' cannot be a closed system: it is not stasis, it is not defined negatively as an absence of temporality, it is not the classic 'slice through time'. Indeed, the closed-system/slice-through-time imagination of space denies the possibility of a real temporality – for there is no mechanism for moving from one slice to the next. Rather the spatiality that I envisage would be open, would be constantly in the process of being made ... It would be integral to space-time (Massey 1999: 264–5).

To open space to time, that is, to open space to movement and change, is to open it to choices and possibilities. It implies an awareness of other possible spaces, of other possible social paths, of other possible histories. In the words of Massey (1999: 271–2):

for there to be multiple trajectories – for there to be coexisting differences – there must be space, and for there to be space there must be multiple trajectories. Thus ... a more adequate understanding of spatiality for our times would entail the recognition that there is more than one story going on in the world and that these stories have, at least a relative autonomy.

This double constituency of space as a moment of action and a mode of presentation is what I call 'capacity'. People deploy capacities in their daily workings, carving out one of many possible forms of space through one of many possible forms of action. In looking for the salient carvings one is looking for the distribution of agency.

Salient and distributed agency: an ethnography of space

The city of Antofagasta is located some fifteen hundred kilometres north of Santiago de Chile and is capital to the region whose territory incorporates the Atacama Desert. The desert mineral deposits (copper, nitrates, lithium, silver) have, for well over a century, provided Chile with its most important source of export revenue and played a major role in financing the country's initial industrialization. Antofagasta was founded in 1866 as a harbour and service centre for the nitrate industry, and its importance for Chile's national economy has since kept growing due to the town's strategic location as a financial and commercial enclave to the mining industry (copper and saltpetre). Antofagasta has thus witnessed, and itself actively participated in, the constitution of Chile's industrial fabric and the projection of its economy onto the international trading network and the 'world system'.

Despite its prominence in the recent economic history of Chile, Antofagasta has never quite captured the popular imagination. A 1960s foxtrot, for example, sang to

the city's deserted and slumbering streets, calling her to wake up from her lethargy (Collier & Sater 1996: 289).

Antofagasta dormida,
tus calles estan desiertas.
¿Como pudiera yo darte
dinamismo siglo veinte?
¡Despierta de tu letargo!

Slumbering Antofagasta,
your streets are deserted ...
How could I give you
twentieth-century dynamism?
Awake from your lethargy!

Antofagasta is a wealthy city by Chilean standards, although this does not show in the urban facade. The neo-colonial architecture of the old city is now in disrepair, cloaked in industrial grime and conveying an impression of decadence. The rest of the city, with the exception of a privileged southern neighbourhood, is a spreading and amorphous slum. This spatial dual environment (rich south, poor rest) has been described as extreme even by Latin American standards (Angell, Lowden & Thorpe 2001). Today, the city boasts a population of 260,000, with people being attracted to Antofagasta for the buoyancy of its mining-dependent labour market. The local authorities even boastfully refer to the city as the 'world's mining capital'. But this has hardly helped to restore an otherwise faded image. People feel ostracized and prostrated, inhabitants of a peripheral territory that gives all to the national economy and receives little back. The city is seen to be part of an exploitative economy and an abusive territory, with the wealth of the land regarded as the origin of all selfishness and disorganization, the source of all unco-ordinated efforts. People, for instance, keep talking about the need to *organizar*, *ordenar*, *limpiar* (organize, order, clean) the city. The Town Hall is constantly announcing plans for the urban regeneration of the city: plans to build coastal promenades, to *hermosear* (enhance the beauty of) its plazas and beaches, to put an end to traffic chaos, to regulate street life, and curb delinquency. Plans, in sum, to fasten and fix what is known by all as a *ciudad flotante* (floating city). (The term points to the number of people that come and go, attracted by the local job market, but disillusioned and discouraged by the grimness of life in the desert.)

At a more mundane level, there is much concern about the city's dusty and dirty streets. The unpaved streets of the poorest neighbourhoods are renowned for their dusty and polluting environment. Residents continually spray them with water, in the hope that this will reduce the risk of dust-borne respiratory diseases and other ailments. In a similar vein, there is great concern these days with the 'overpopulation' of stray dogs in the city. These animals are thought of as both dangerously fierce and unclean. The local newspaper recently quantified the latter as follows: 'In one week, the city's 48,000 stray dogs produce 72 tonnes of excrement, which in turn attracts flies and infections' (*El Mercurio de Antofagasta*, 13 May 2002). But this is not all. Pigeons, too, are stigmatized as carriers of parasites and diseases. The health authorities say that their numbers constitute a 'plague' and discourage people from feeding them in public places. I do not think it is too far-fetched, therefore, to say that sanitation works as a (frustrated) principle of social

engineering. Indeed, at one point the Town Hall went so far as to launch an advertising campaign featuring the slogan: 'Su Ciudad no es Suciedad [Your Town is not the same as Dirt]' a word-game that played on the phonetic similarity between the capitalized words.

Dirt and pollution are also associated with the uncivilized, and in particular with delinquency. The unpleasant and inhospitable streets of the city's northern quarters are said to be populated by *gente quebrada* ('broken people', meaning those without integrity, sinister). The association is expanded into what could be crudely glossed as an opposition between nature (here, the dusty wilderness of the desert) and culture (expressed in the shape of urban forms, such as the pavement, but also as 'vegetation' or 'green', in other words, that which proclaims the domestication of the desert). The key word here is *sano*, healthful. It is pleasant to walk around an urban environment that is *sano*, with trees, green areas, and vegetation. In Antofagasta, however, other than in the city centre, it is difficult to find such areas. People talk of the streets that make up the city centre, for instance, as 'agreeable, with green areas, street shows, and so on', or 'clean, pretty, and tranquil'; this is an environment where the youth meet *sanamente*, healthfully, harmlessly, unlike the streets of the rest of the city, where 'there are few examples to be found of a healthful youth: there are drug addicts, alcoholics, and a notable lack of pleasant places' (Flores, Hallet & Javier Rivera 1995: 57, 65). All these factors have resulted in the city authorities facing a very serious problem in the inhabitants' lack of identity. A Chilean colloquial expression, *no estar ni ahí* (meaning not to be somewhere, not to care about what happens where one is), has even been adopted to describe the city's care for herself: the people of Antofagasta act as if the city was not there for them, as if there was nothing to care about, nothing to which to relate. My friends often illustrated this sense of alienation for me by pointing to the numerous graffiti that colour the cityscape. The drawings were always referred to as acts of 'vandalism' and set in the wider context of the 'cultural problem' that affected the city.

This is roughly the backdrop to social life in Antofagasta: a city that is seen as unhealthy, dirty, and potentially dangerous; a non-place, to use Marc Augé's expression (1995), except that, in this case, the label applies to a whole city rather than to the sparse localities of 'supermodernity'. In a situation like this, how do people confront the creation of viable spaces of sociality? How do people create value when the 'spaces' given to social life are something against which to fight? In other words, where does value reside when the land is not a repository of value?⁷ Can there be 'spaces' for the expression of agency and identity that are not land- or place-related?

To answer these questions I will return to the ethnography. In what follows my analysis focuses on two 'spaces' (Avenida del Brasil and Líder, the local equivalent of a shopping centre) as an exemplar of how the people of Antofagasta relate to their city. My position, following that of my informants, is that these spaces are not settings or places where social life takes place, but paths to possible value forms and value situations.

Avenida del Brasil is a clean and elegant palm tree boulevard that is Antofagasta's only avenue with offices and high-class residences. In 1998, the Town Hall decided to install some children's playground equipment in the central esplanade of the avenue. This decision, by all accounts unjust, since only a privileged minority group actually resides along the avenue, was an obvious attempt at sculpting a built environment which was patently extraneous to the rest of the city. It thus became some-

thing akin to an encapsulated area, clearly at odds with the rest of the city. Nevertheless, with its air of tranquility and attractively illuminated spaces, the avenue and its play areas, even though perhaps intended for the enjoyment of the immediate vicinity only, has become a favourite spot for the weekend strolls of families from all parts of Antofagasta.

For many families, particularly those with small children, the avenue has become a virtually compulsory destination for their Saturday and Sunday outings. They will go there sometime after lunch and will linger about the boulevard's play areas for two, sometimes even three hours. The play equipment, which includes swings, spiralling and straight slides, swinging ropes, and so on, attracts mainly young parents (mostly women) with their children, who are generally between 4 and 10 years old. Once in the gardens, the parents sit down on the benches or grass that surround the equipment and talk amongst themselves whilst keeping an eye on their children.

Pamela was a 27-year-old single mother of a 6-year-old boy. She lived with the child in her parents' home, located in one of the neighbourhoods adjacent to the avenue. That, of course, allowed her unusually free use of the gardens. She might go with Alejandro, her son, to the gardens on an odd weekday's evening or briefly after lunch before taking him back to school. Still, on Saturday evenings she would almost ritually go with the boy to the gardens. I accompanied her on one such outing and this is what she told me about the gardens:

I am grateful I live next to the parks. Mind you, I think I would bring my child to the parks every weekend no matter where I lived. He likes it here: he can move freely about, he makes friends; he runs and laughs and that makes me feel good. Moreover, I like it here myself: there is no place of its kind elsewhere in Antofagasta ... It is *hermoso* [beautiful] and peaceful. It is fresh and clean and makes you feel safe.

The idea that the gardens and children's games at Avenida del Brasil are a unique place in the whole of Antofagasta is shared by many. The gardens are, above all, thought of as a safe place, one that is noticeably at odds with the rest of the city. Paula, a 27-year-old mother of two spelt out the implications of this uniqueness for me, associating the ambience of Avenida del Brasil with the commercial environment of Líder, the local shopping mall, and with the wider issue of the city's identity:

For a long time there was nowhere else to go. This can get to be a very suffocating city, with so few things to do. I think that may explain why so many people looked outside the city in constructing their future: the identity problem that everybody speaks about. Well, it is hard to identify with something that has so little to offer. Now we have Líder which kind of brings together into one place a different range of alternatives: the stalls upstairs [selling trinkets, crafts, incense], Homecenter [a home-depot store], the supermarket, the [fast-food] restaurants. It is not as if I can afford to go to the restaurants regularly, but at least I can walk about the place with my children, get them away from home every now and then ... My mum, or my sister, often come with me and the children to Avenida del Brasil. But otherwise there are not so many occasions when one can get out and do things. I think Líder has become such a popular place because of that: because it allows people to get out.

The idea that the commercial and recreational environments of Avenida del Brasil and Líder have become spaces for the expression of agency and identity is again

conveyed in a comment about Líder made to me by María, one of my closest friends in the field:

It is so big, Alberto. It stocks literally anything that you can think of. I am sure we can find some Spanish delicatessen food for you there. Of course, its presence has changed everything now. So many people shop there now. It is so cheap, and there are so many nice things on display ... Children who used to ramble through the streets of the city can now be seen lingering and strolling about the corridors of the supermarket. Families will go there just for the fun of it, for an evening's outing, to take the children out, to shop ... I think Líder has done a great favour to the local authorities. Take, for example, the *Cachureos* show [a giant puppet show for children organized at Líder]: the kids love it, and it has changed the way families now spend their Sunday mornings. Before, one had to keep coming up with ideas of things to do to keep the children busy. Now people no longer feel so oppressed, so peripheral and neglected. Thanks to Líder now we are all a little bit more central, if you know what I mean.

At this point I asked María the question: 'So what did you use to do before the arrival of Líder?' This is what she replied:

I don't know. Invent. We used to go to Calle Prat – we still go there. It is fun to be there, with all the people, the street musicians, the rappers. We would also go to the beach. Sometimes Juan [her husband] would organize *paseos* [outings] to Chacabuco [an abandoned nitrate refinery in the middle of the desert, 100 kilometres away], to San Pedro [a picturesque Andean village 230 kilometres away], to Juan López [a beach resort 30 kilometres away]. Actually, when I come to think about it, we used to do lots of different things, even if we didn't get out of the city – not that there are many places you can go to, anyway; after all, we do live in the desert. So we got together for barbecues, for *tesito* [evening tea], we visited relatives ...

I have quoted María here because of the nature of the association she makes between places and forms of social relationships (shopping, outings, having tea, and so on). For María, 'getting out' (in a city surrounded by a landscape where to be 'out' can only mean to be 'nowhere') means 'doing things', literally. She speaks of known places not as geographical locations but as vehicles for the expression of social relationships. The desert is at once a landscape of possibilities and a constraining environment. Possibilities are worked out in spatial forms, through social relationships. People cope with the limiting and coercive structure of the desert by reinventing the spatiality of their social relationships. In María's account, places and practices are mutually constituted – space and agency, analogous dimensions. A friend came close to phrasing the issue in precisely those terms when we met on my last visit to the city in April 2002:

Jessica says that Antofagasta has become too small for me. I think she is right. I mean, I love my city, but it is just too constraining here, there is no room to do anything. It has all to do with this social pressure, you see, pressure to conform. Every now and then my mum brings up the issue of when am I going to marry and have kids. That is the only thing you can do in this city: marry and have kids. And take them out for a walk to Avenida del Brasil, I suppose ... So I feel like I keep running and bumping into the city's walls [laughs and long pause]. Funny, city walls ... Funny that we think of society as a set of walls, of the desert as a wall, encircling us, constraining us ... Anyway, the point is that right now I feel like I should get out of here.

I believe that Jessica's and María's remarks highlight the extent to which the widely observed lack of identity of Antofagasta was to some degree a product of the spatial pressures that were being exerted upon (some) social relationships. What

they show is how social relationships (the agency of children and young people being two clear instances here) were being partially curtailed by not being allowed to deploy their capacities. Or one might say that we see here how people's sense of power and efficacy flows from their realization of spatial forms. This point may be best explained and illustrated by turning once more to the ethnography.

In addition to the play equipment at Avenida del Brasil, the gardens of the avenue have recently seen the arrival of a number of sideshows that also cater for children. Amongst these are clowns, puppet and marionette theatres, young artists who teach children how to paint, and story-tellers. The ambience of recreation and entertainment is further enhanced by the presence nearby of the retail environment of the Korlaet del Parque (a supermarket). Parents and children will often cross over to the supermarket to buy refreshments, sit down for a coffee or a sweet at the in-house café, or spend time at the children's rides that are also installed in the supermarket's parking space. Not far away, some three hundred metres to the south, is the Regional Stadium and the Parque Japonés (a park). Next to the stadium is a large tract of empty land that is occupied for most of the year by the *Fisa*, a small private amusement park. This is located to one side of the stadium and tends to be fronted by a string of eight to ten stalls (the 'hippy market' or 'hippies', as some of my informants called them) that sell indigenous craft, tattooing, t-shirts, necklaces, earrings and rings, candles and incense. On the other side, a similar tract of unused land has been occasionally co-opted for the seasonal visits of a travelling circus. The whole area – the stadium, the pieces of land adjacent to it, and the park – are seen by most as a continuum leading to the *balneario municipal* (municipal beach) that is only some twenty-five metres due east of the park. The beach is the only place in Antofagasta, other than the city centre, the nightclub district, and Líder, where one can find a consolidated recreational alternative, here made up of one restaurant, one ice-cream and coffee shop, a petrol station, two fast-food outlets, and a cinema (which closed shortly after I left the field). Many families therefore think of their visit to the children's games in Avenida del Brasil as a first stop in an evening stroll that will also take them to the hippies' market, to the *Fisa*, perhaps the cinema, and might even conclude with an ice-cream or a hamburger at one of the beach eateries. Pamela told me of how her visits to the children's games at Avenida del Brasil with Alejandro were often, if somebody accompanied them (Alejandro's father, her parents, or a cousin of hers who was also the mother of a young child), extended into longer outings that would inevitably take them to the *Fisa* and the municipal beach resort:

Alejandro likes the amusements at the *Fisa*, and I like them too, so we often go there after spending some time at the children's games. I prefer going with someone else, though, for, although it is not a long way there, it is nicer if my parents or Alexandra [her cousin] come along. We can all then stop, perhaps, at the Korlaet and have a doughnut or coffee or, once in the *balneario*, go to the ice-cream shop. If we are not alone, I enjoy the stroll as much as I think he does. When the Mexican Circus was last here, that was really terrific. We actually never attended any of the shows but just hung around it, so he [Alejandro] could watch the elephants and the giraffes and the tigers. I think the circus was here for some three weeks and there was not one weekend when we did not stroll all the way there to see the animals.

I was intrigued by her description of their outings as a succession of stays at specific points (the games, the Korlaet, the *Fisa*), so I asked her if they actually stuck to the same sequence of places on every outing. This is what she replied:

No, of course not. Well, we do always walk in one direction, if that is what you mean. We start at the games and then stroll towards the Parque Japonés. I don't particularly like to stop at the Korlaet: I find it very expensive and very small. But Alejandro knows that they have put up their own set of play equipment there, so I do tend to find myself pulled there by him. The Mexican circus, as I told you, was only here for three weeks, so now we just go straight to the *Fisa*. I like the hippies very much, so if my parents come along I do tend to leave Alejandro with them [at the *Fisa*, which is next to the stalls of the hippies] for a brief time while I browse the items. I love incense and candles, and they have some very nice stuff there. Sometimes, if there is something worth watching at the *Gran Vía* [a cinema], we might even contemplate going in. Then again, I remember when *Titanic* [the film] opened: there were hundreds of people everywhere, queuing up for the movie, at the *Fisa*, at the *balneario*; there were too many people and I did not like it, so we went back home quite early.

This is, undoubtedly, a stroll where the notions of 'family' and 'material culture' influence and inscribe each other in the production of their own ideologies and categorical classifications. But it is also an occasion where an evening stroll is objectified as a concrete temporal geography (Saturday and Sunday evening) with a concrete socio-spatial rhythm (family outing). Parents (primarily women), children, and the landscape of consumption (entertainment, restaurants, markets, and supermarkets) are conflated to imprint Avenida del Brasil with a clear and distinct spatiality. The spatiality of the avenue is constructed as a flow of events: a stay at the games followed by a walk to the 'hippies', followed by a stay at the beach, followed by a quick meal at a fast-food restaurant. The stages of which the prototypical weekend evening stroll is made up are known, its structural series therefore well established. Yet the outing is constructed not as permanence at one place, but as a succession of events, a deployment of capacities. Family relationships and values are well deployed if their distribution and propagation prove efficacious; that is, if their presence in and engagement with an environment accomplishes 'things' (to quote María). For this reason, the series of events itself remains structurally open: the children might be disappointed at not meeting some of their friends at the games and might thus want to move on quickly to the Korlaet del Parque or the *Fisa*; the film at the cinema might attract the interest of children and parents alike; the restaurants might be too crowded; the weather too cold for a long stroll, and so on. The very fact that space is constructed as a concatenation of capacities rather than a setting – the very fact of social relationships being inherently spatial – allows for a degree of flexibility in its process of structuration. And herein, I think, lies the crucial difference between theoretical approaches to landscape or place and the theorizing of space that this article advocates. In the former, the avenue would stand as an index of dynamic social processes; in particular, as a dimension of material culture (buildings, playground equipment, supermarkets) that is imprinted by and objectifies certain kinds or aspects of social relationships, for example, family outings. The idea that space is a capacity, however, underpins such interpretations by allowing social categories (such as 'the family') to be considered in environmental terms in the first place. In other words, people relate to and engage with landscape in various ways because social relationships are inherently spatial.

Conclusion

In a recent review of Tim Ingold's perspective on place as a form of Heideggerian 'dwelling' (2000), Fred Myers has drawn from his own ethnographic material

amongst the Pintupi people of the Western Australian Desert to argue for a less abstract and more practical, socio-politically mediated understanding of how places are constructed:

My own work emphasizes not, as [Edward] Casey and Ingold each would appear to say, the ‘culturalization of space’ or cultural construction – as a projection of a culture’s meanings onto unmarked, objective space. Rather, I have insisted that place enters into Aboriginal social life in a fashion similar to other material forms, mediated by social action, as a potential formulation of similarity and difference, a token of identity and exchange (Myers 2000: 79).

Myers is right in calling attention to the socio-material practices through which ‘places’ are brought to life. But in doing so, the theoretical stance which he develops becomes obscured by the richness of his ethnography, in that the desert, for the Pintupi, is a place to be related to – it is in the process of what the Pintupi call ‘holding’ a country, of claiming landownership, that Pintupi identity lies. This, however, need not always be the case. In working out social relationships, people may not relate to a territory, as I hope my ethnography of social life in Antofagasta indicates. People’s dwelling in a place may not necessarily lead to the creation of ties with that place. But it will always involve the deploying of an array of capacities of some sort. My concern with Myers’s position has therefore to do with what I have called the Durkheimian gaze that underlies his reading of place-construction: a territorially infused understanding of the spatial capabilities of social relationships. In this kind of account, the spatiality of social relations is read territorially, in their ‘ways of placemaking’, to use Myers’s own formulation. But there is more to spatial relations than their objectifying or place-making capacities. Myers’s own ethnographic material illustrates what I mean by this:

Elders consciously attempt to transmit their identity through time by creating the same identity in others, ‘replacing’ themselves through time as ‘holders’ of country. One can see the process of replacement as a transmission of identity in which men give their country for their *katja* (sons or sister’s sons) to ‘grab’ ... the people most likely to replace seniors are those who were, as children, ‘held’ by them. Ultimately, seniors achieve their most significant status in this hierarchical exchange, just as they take on this position of ‘holding’ others. In the production of social persons, they give to younger men the *capacity* to establish extensive relations of equivalent exchange with each other and to become holders themselves (Myers 2000: 91, 93; emphasis added).

There is an interesting comparison to be drawn here between Myers’s ethnography of ‘place’ and the description of landscape as a moment of a process of elicitation that Eric Hirsch afforded in his account of the *gab* ritual of the Fuyuge (1995). The Fuyuge, Hirsch has written, conceive of their *gab* ritual as a moment when ‘truths’ are revealed. The ritual takes place in a village that has been constructed for the occasion. Village (landscape) and ritual are therefore implicated in a process of revelation, of unconcealing:

Capacities which are normally hidden and concealed (pigs, crops, valuables or names) are periodically brought together – concentrated – where particular truths are revealed. What is referred to as landscape and ritual are two moments of this single process ... a coercive process whereby units [pigs, crops, etc.] are brought into existence resulting in a single, but momentary potential, or truth (Hirsch 1995: 68, 69; emphasis added).

What I have been arguing thus far is that both Myers's and Hirsch's understandings of place are territorially infused because, for the Pintupi and for the Fuyuge, the deployment of capacities (the strategies of elicitation) that defines the spatiality of social relationships is all about 'holding' the country and claiming landownership, about being with the land and unveiling its tellurian 'truth'. The position I have advanced, on the contrary, is that it is space – not just landscape or place – that has capacity; that if landscape or place are a predicate of our actions it is only because our actions are constitutively spatial. For what if a people's identity is not land-related? What if identity is not, as Durkheim said, regionally circumscribed (as has historically been the case in Antofagasta)? Are the social relationships taking 'place' there no longer spatial for all that? How are we to account for the spatiality of such non-places? My position here has been to argue that only if space is seen as a carrier of value and meaning can one attempt to answer these questions. For only then is it no longer necessary to download meaning onto a territory or weave it into a land. Only then can we have spaces that bear no attachment to place, and can we thus understand the process of eliciting meaning, not as a referential activity, but as a mode of display and aperture, a moment of propagation.

This way of looking at space also affords us new ways of thinking about the world and society. In particular, it affects the categories of understanding that we have traditionally used in the analysis of social life. Take, for example, our taken-for-granted assumptions concerning 'the family'. Euro-American analyses and constructs of the family have tended to locate family life in the context of a 'house' or domestic sphere, where the latter is the 'natural space' for family life. This is undoubtedly a rather artificial coupling of concepts. Families do indeed live in houses, but they also hold themselves together outside the house. In fact, it is often the case that it is what they do outside the house that brings value to the family, what happens indoors frequently being a source of tension and dispute. In the ethnographic case that I have used to exemplify this, it is most evident in the way that women and children distribute their 'presences' throughout the city. In Avenida del Brasil and Líder (and in Antofagasta at large; see Corsín Jiménez 2001), the invisible fabric of space is threaded, primarily, by the activities of women and children. The space of the avenue is therefore no longer to be understood as the context – symbolic, environmental, or otherwise – that frames the relationships of women and children, but as itself an aspect of those relationships. And the family, of which the mother-child bond is the fundamental component in Antofagasta, can now be envisaged as a structure of distributed capacities, linking material elements (children's games, restaurants, cinemas) to social practices (outings, walks, shopping trips).⁸ 'The family' is thus no longer to be understood as a closed unit, but as a propagated and propagational structure. Agency becomes dimensional, extended across things and people (cf. Gell 1998); it becomes materially woven into the world, and distributed as a capacity.

NOTES

This article is based on a D.Phil. thesis submitted to the Faculty of Anthropology and Geography of the University of Oxford (Corsín Jiménez 2001). I am indebted to Peter Rivière for his very careful and critical supervision. An early draft of the article also benefited greatly from his comments. Mette

Berg and Eric Hirsch read a more recent version and I am very grateful to them for their valuable suggestions and criticisms. I am also grateful to James Carrier and the anonymous readers for the *Journal*, all of whom gave detailed and incisive criticism that has resulted in a clearer argument. This article has been completed during the tenure of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship held at St Hugh's College, Oxford. I am grateful to both institutions for their support.

¹That is, both as potency and spaciousness.

²Barbara Bender's recent multi-vocal ethnography of Stonehenge is a case in point (Bender 1998). For whilst the work is subtitled 'making space', it is only 'landscape' that is problematized and theorized. (The index contains no entry for the term 'space', as opposed to sixteen for 'landscape'.)

³See, for example, the following passage from Olwig and Hastrup's edited volume, *Siting culture*: 'One of these limitations [inherent in the approach to the study of culture that has been dominant until now] is the tendency of anthropologists to study those "natives" who stay put in the particular area, where the anthropologists are doing their field work ... The difficulty of seeing movement as an aspect of social life in general is related to the fact that mobility, in so far as it involved settled people, has been regarded as a special and temporary phenomenon' (1997: 5-6).

⁴I borrow the notion of 'taskscape' from Tim Ingold (2000). I do not think that my view of space as a capacity is fundamentally very different from Ingold's taskscapes, except for the fact that I see space as both a value- and action-vehicular concept. I read space in the meaning-making practices of people, not outside them.

⁵For a recent example by an anthropologist of a non-representational ethnography, see Hastrup (1998). (Hastrup's work also deals, among other topics, with issues of space and landscape.)

⁶Note the Durkheimian undertone to Munn's conception of regional worlds.

⁷David Graeber has recently reviewed the history of anthropology's failure to tackle the problem of value (Graeber 2001). Graeber's own position is to regard value as the expression of human powers and agency. This, I think, is akin to my view of space as a capacity, that is, as a form of agency and, therefore, as a carrier of value.

⁸The ontology of this approach shares many postulates with so-called actor-network theory (see e.g. Law & Hassard 1999; Strathern 1996). In both cases, the substance of a category is distributed across a network of (possible) constituent elements. Thus, when we talk of 'the family' what we are really talking about is the bringing and holding together of a number of operational elements; in Antofagasta these include the mother-child relationship, certain sites and places (supermarkets, playgrounds, beaches, and parks), and certain socio-spatial practices (family outings).

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Sur l'espace en tant que capacité

Resumé

Cet article porte sur l'espace et les rapports sociaux. Il s'agit plus précisément de l'espace que prennent les rapports sociaux et de celui qu'ils contiennent. Il traite aussi de l'efficacité des rapports sociaux pour ségréguer leurs propres contextes de valeur et de sens. A ce sujet, l'article étudie aussi comment la capacité d'agir se met en oeuvre. Cette 'mise en œuvre' de la capacité d'agir, sa croissance et son apparition dans une structure de sens est ce que j'appelle 'capacité'. Les rapports sociaux ont une 'capacité'. C'est à dire qu'ils ont à la fois une étendue et une puissance. Ils accomplissent des fins, et ces fins sont accomplies *quelque part*. A cet égard, l'espace (ou la capacité) des rapports sociaux est très différent des locutions que nous sommes venus à considérer comme étant des formes d'espace, tels que le paysage et le lieu. Il s'agit donc également, dans cet article, de critiquer la façon dont le paysage et le lieu ont été récemment théorisés en anthropologie. Dans l'argumentation qui suit, mes points de vue sur l'espace se basent sur un compte-rendu ethnographique des dimensions à travers lesquelles l'espace urbain est construit dans la ville chilienne d'Antofagasta.

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