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Preserving and Constructing Place Attachment in Europe

Foreword by Tiziana Banini

 Springer

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Foreword

Place Attachment and The Power of Geographical Approaches

Dealing with place attachment implies two basic issues, still subject to discussion within the scientific community: the one related to its definition, the other to the methodological aspects. In other words, what is place attachment? And how can it be detected? The first question is due to the confusion between the terms strictly connected to place attachment (sense of place, rootedness, belonging, identity of place, place dependence and place satisfaction) and the consequent need for clarification (Giuliani, 2003; Peng et al., 2020). The second question concerns geography in particular, which has produced a large amount of theoretical studies on place and related concepts, but still, few are the methodological and empirical ones. Above all, it is a question of understanding what the contribution of geography to place attachment can be today, given that since at least 40 years environmental psychology has produced most of the research on this topic, both theoretical and empirical.

Geography began to deal with place, sense of place and related concepts starting from the 1970s, thanks to humanistic geography. Although anticipated by the seminal papers of J.K. Wright (1947) and D. Lowenthal (1961), the works of Tuan (1974), Relph (1976) and other humanistic geographers opened a universe of new reflections to geographic research. Focusing on people's emotional ties with places, conceived as meaningful spaces for subjects and communities, humanistic geographers devoted most of their attention to theoretical aspects, drawing inspiration from M. Heidegger, M. Merleau-Ponty, E. Casey, J. Malpass and other phenomenological thinkers. Marxist and feminist geographers soon accused humanistic geography to recall a nostalgic, closed, universalist, essentialist and male chauvinist vision of the place, proposing an open, hybrid and progressive concept of it, which immediately obtained a generalised positive response. As a result, humanistic geography crossed a relative "exile" during the 1980s (Seamon, 2014). Afterwards, the intuitions of humanist geographers became of fundamental importance for the post-structuralist developments of the whole human geography (Murdoch, 2006). However, the contributions of geographers on place attachment have been limited

so far, since they have often spoken of this notion in an implicit way, or as a synonym for “place rootedness” or “place belonging” (Diener & Hagen, 2022).

Thanks also to the contribution of humanistic geography, place attachment (and related concepts) has progressively become a domain of environmental psychology. Many definitions have been given on place attachment from this discipline. Generally speaking, it indicates the positive emotional ties that connect subjects with places, mainly the residential ones, so that Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001, p. 274) define place attachment as “a positive affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place”. In this regard, the length of residence, the social relationships in the considered setting and the identification with the neighbourhood, as well as aesthetic and symbolic values, seem to be predictors of place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Korpela, 2012). Environmental psychology studies also underline that place attachment is of fundamental importance for psychological balance and good adjustment, for overcoming identity crises and giving people the stability they need in an ever changing world, as well as for experiencing positive emotions by establishing a healthy relationship with places (Scannell & Gifford, 2017).

Although environmental psychology research confirms that people are mostly attached to the local scale, followed by the national one (Lewicka, 2011), the discipline has discussed the issue of place attachment in an era marked by mobility and globalisation. On this point, in the debate between particularists (“places where people live continue to matter as they provide a sense of ‘home’ in an increasingly turbulent world”) and universalists (“the consequence of people’s increased mobility is that they can no longer develop thick attachments to places”) (Duyvendak, 2011, pp. 9–10), environmental psychology has played a crucial role. In fact, regardless of how much people’s practices are based on mobility, some form of place attachment is always present in their lives (Lewicka, 2008). Therefore, place attachment remains a relevant topic of inquiry, given that research in this field highlights how the increased mobility of people, if anything, generates more places to feel attached to, rather than no attachment to any place (Di Masso et al., 2019).

In the light of the relevant scientific literature produced by environmental psychology on place attachment, both at a theoretical and empirical level, what can be the contribution of geography?

Geographic perspective could be prominent precisely because environmental psychology has focused attention on one of the three components of place attachment formalised by Scannell and Gifford (2010), namely *Person*, neglecting the other two (*Process*, *Place*) (Lewicka, 2011). In particular, psychology has dealt with the affective and emotional dimension of place attachment, as well as on the cognitive and behavioural one (Lewicka, 2008), and devoting attention to individual place experiences has led this discipline to neglect the socio-political implications of such attachments (Sebastien, 2020). On the other hand, planning and decision-making studies focus mainly on the quality of the physical components of the place, overlooking the relational bonds between people and places (Ujang & Zakarija, 2015).

As Oana-Ramona Ilovan and Iwona Markuszewska state in their comprehensive introduction to this volume, “The specificity of studies undertaken by geographers consists of placing the research problem in a spatial context”. This means considering the relationship between people and their living environment in terms of collective perceptions, representations, relations and practices “through which people develop meaningful connections with places”.

One of the keywords related to place attachment is “experience”: from a geographical point of view, there is no experience without a place, that is human experiences are always situated in a spatial context (Cresswell, 2015; Seamon, 2018). This means that, beyond the subjective experiences (direct or mediated by representations), there is a physical referent to which our attachment is related. However, the first definitions given by humanistic geographers, focused on the characteristics of places able to solicit emotions, feelings and aesthetic appreciation, have been replaced over time by the idea, shared at an interdisciplinary level, that place is above all a social construction, material and symbolic at the same time, which affects behaviour and decisions (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014; Sebastien, 2020). Considering places in their ever-changing is equally important; therefore, a relevant question from a geographical point of view concerns how the processes of deterritorialisation or reterritorialisation affect or not place attachment. In this perspective, place attachment is an ongoing and multidimensional socio-spatial process.

An interactive relationship exists between people and places: human experiences, values, representations, feelings and emotions transform (abstract) spaces into (meaningful) places, as well as place’s features and dynamics contribute to generating place identities, place attachments, rootedness and senses of place. Thus, as people and places are assumed to be ever changing entities, there’s no possibility to support the essentialist rhetoric that attributes innate and unchangeable qualities to places, which Massey (1994) assimilated to a conservative and reactionary political position. Similarly, place attachment cannot be conceived in a static, closed and taken-for-granted way, because this would mean presuming a coincidence between places and cultures that cannot be sustained at the time of globalisation and the so-called *mobility turn*. In this regard, the place attachment of migrants and diasporic people, which involves both attachment and movement (Fortier, 2005), offers a universe of significant inquiry, not yet fully addressed in geography. Indeed, such studies would be useful to understand in a metaphorical sense the identities and multiple place attachments that connote the lives of many individuals and groups, as well as to detect the contemporary meaning of other geographical key concepts, such as scale, representation and border (Mendoza & Morén-Alegret, 2013).

Working geographically on place attachment, and related concepts, makes the object/subject relation an issue even more evident for the discipline, due to all the related ontological and epistemological implications. Indeed, geography, unlike other social and humanistic disciplines, has to deal with a material referent, that is the Earth’s surface in its multiple articulations and configurations. After a long experience of theoretical approaches centred on Cartesian rationalism, that is, on the presumed objectivity and neutrality of knowledge, geographers have become aware that any of their descriptions of the world can only be partial and incomplete,

reflecting the values, priorities and visions of the interpreting subjects. Geography produces metaphorical knowledge, as G. Dematteis already stated in the 1980s (Fall & Minca, 2013), which is anything but politically innocent.

In the context of humanistic geography, Nicholas Entrikin took a similar stance, speaking of a *betweenness of place*, in order to describe “the basic tension that exists between the relatively subjective, existential sense of place and the relatively objective, naturalistic conception of place” (Entrikin, 1991, p. 7). However, only with the *cultural turn* of the early 1980s, territories and places from objective and neutral entities started to be conceived as social constructions, to whose definition narratives, representations, and social practices concur (cf. Banini & Ilovan, 2021). This led many geographers to keep distance from any essentialised vision of territories and places, since “[t]o say that an entity or a fact is constructed is to render it fragile by removing its character as evidence” (Sebastien, 2020, p. 205).

Thanks to the seminal contributions of Massey (2005), Harvey (2006) and other scholars - as anticipated above - an open, porous, hybrid, relational and progressive idea of the place has become pervasive in geography. Place is mainly considered for its connections, flows and transcalar relations. Place is a node of global networks, not necessarily hierarchical, which change over time and, as anthropologist Escobar (2001, p. 169) suggests, operate more as fractal structures than like fixed architectures. Similarly, also place attachment has been conceived in an open, flexible, dynamic and multidimensional way (Diener & Hagen, 2022).

The contribution of geography to place attachment also lies in its methods, because unlike environmental psychology, whose work is mainly based on tests, questionnaires, scales of measurement and rigorous procedural standards, geography uses a range of interpretive approaches: oral histories, interviews, focus groups, as well as visual and participatory methods (i.e., community mapping, narrative mapping and walking interviews) (Smith & Aranha, 2022). As Ilovan and Markuszewska underline in their introduction to this volume, qualitative methods not only “allow for more in-depth and multispectral analysis of the concept of place attachment” but also enable “the co-production of knowledge” between researchers and respondents. In other words, geographic research practices have increasingly been considered as a contextual and contingent process of knowledge construction. Different are also the main aims of the research: if environmental psychology tends to use the information gathered during the surveys to measure the intensity and the typologies of place attachment, geography is mainly interested in analysing the socio-political implications of the different place attachments (e.g. in terms of effective or potential conflicts, and related possible solutions).

A common interest between environmental psychology and geography studies lies in the attention paid to pro-environmental behaviours and participatory practices. Several environmental psychology studies have shown a frequent association between place attachment and the actions that individuals or groups promote for the sustainable use of resources and the protection of the environment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Similarly, geography’s interest for citizens’ participation in decision-making processes has gained relevance during the last decades, in the wake of the growing attention for the social engagement of the discipline. However, still few

contributions have examined participatory processes in the light of place attachment, focusing rather on the socio-political dimension of citizen's movements, civic networks and collective action strategies.

Another theme of interest raised by psychology (and also experienced by scholars of other disciplines who have dealt with it) is that place attachment, as well as place identity, often operates outside of conscious awareness (Giuliani, 2003; Korpela, 2012), at least until it is threatened by natural or human events. In this sense, undertaking participatory research-action pathways, working together with residents and actors, could be a tool not only for soliciting place awareness but also for negotiating different interests and needs, so as to reach shared visions and objectives. In other words, place attachment can be built collectively, for the benefit of both social relations and people-place relationships. In this perspective, territorial identity, as well as place attachment, is not so much a reference for "being", as for "becoming" together (Banini, 2017, 2021). Building a collective "place consciousness" (Magnaghi, 2005, p. 79), based on both the awareness of place potentialities and the emotional ties that link people to places, means exactly to open a never-ending dialogue between different actors, aimed at pursuing shared and contextualised goals.

Diener and Hagen (2021), in their introduction to the recent special issue of *Geographical Review* focused on place attachment, assert that place attachment studies would benefit greatly from more explicit contributions by geographers. The same reflection can be found in other recent geographical contributions on the subject (cf. Smith, 2018; Sebastien, 2020), which underline the need for new conceptual frameworks focused on place attachments, for both the scientific advancement and the public engagement of the discipline. Further interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration, especially between geography and psychology, is also considered necessary (Devine-Wright, 2015).

This volume, edited by Oana-Ramona Ilovan and Iwona Markuszewska, represents a relevant example of the contribution that geography can give to place attachment studies. If the editors' introduction presents an accurate critical review of the interdisciplinary scientific literature on place attachment and related concepts, highlighting the multiple dimensions involved in such a notion, the chapters of the book examine a rich variety of case studies related to many European contexts: from Spain to Romania, from Poland to Portugal, and from Italy to Estonia. In these chapters, the authors deal with place attachment in different spatial contexts (i.e. rural and urban, natural and transboundary, and touristic and residential), using different theoretical frameworks (i.e. phenomenology and social constructivism), perspectives (i.e. regional development, participatory practices, de-industrialisation, urban regeneration processes and social conflict), methods (i.e. semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, questionnaires and textual analysis) and subjective experiences (i.e. those of second-home owners, entrepreneurs, gentrifiers, activists, young people, linguistic minorities and metro users), providing a wide range of bibliographic, theoretical and methodological references.

The conclusions of the volume, written by the editors, underline the relevance of place attachment in spatial planning practices, supporting the idea of a "sensitive

spatial planning”, that is connected “to ordinary people’s wishes, needs, concerns, and lives”. The editors also highlight the golden threads that run through the chapters of the volume, with particular attention to the breaking, strengthening or (re) construction of the emotional ties between people and places, due to the transformations that cross places and/or the changes of people’s lived experiences. Place attachment as a tool for both scientific research advancement and social action is also underlined, as well as further developments on this topic are suggested, for example in the light of the growing relevance of digital experiences as a mediator of the relationship between people and places.

Proposing a collective book on place attachment today is an act of courage and a challenge, as it implies the (re)reading of the key notions of humanistic geography in light of both the interdisciplinary context and the relational, post-structuralist and constructivist turns of geography, while filling the gap in geographic empirical studies on place attachment and related concepts at the same time. Above all, the book shows the variety of perspectives through which place attachment can be understood at the time of mobility, digital communications and environmental emergencies, reflecting traditions, social priorities, narratives and discourses developed in different European territorial and academics contexts, which often differ both from each other and the Anglophone mainstream.

For all this, I am honoured to have been invited to write the foreword to this book, and I wish the editors and all authors the success this challenging collective work deserves.

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