

Avdikos, Vasilis

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## The Space Between Us; Taking Stock, Looking Ahead

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# **The space between us; taking stock, looking ahead**

**Vasilis Avdikos**  
**PhD Candidate,**  
**Department of Town and Regional Planning,**  
**The University of Sheffield**  
**Winter street,**  
**S10 2TN**  
[v.avdikos@shef.ac.uk](mailto:v.avdikos@shef.ac.uk)

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## **Abstract**

The attempt to conceptualise the current relational turn in the spatial development literature should begin with the very basic element of space. In the fields of spatial development there are two broad perspectives of “space”, which have both formed the basis of a long standing debate in multiple dimensions (eg. deduction- induction, quantitative- qualitative etc). The first perspective sees space as a *container of action*. Action is clearly demarcated from space, which has become “neutral” and no dynamic relation exists between them. Regions can then be compared and the measurable elements of action analysed and modelled through positivism. Scholars from the second perspective partially reject that logic and tend to emphasise the role of the past and that of embeddedness of action in time-space. They see space as a *medium for action*. Every region (or locality) here is a unique, historically produced, entity with its own politics, institutions and culture that cannot be compared with other regions in a positivistic sense, nor can best practices be easily transferred. Space forms an existent alterity and what matters is the inter-relational action that produces space and at the same time it is influenced by space.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

There is a growing interest and a turn in the academic agendas of spatial development (or regional development) about a more relational approach between space and humans (see institutional thickness, social capital, untraded interdependencies etc). Others suggest a more holistic approach in response to the literature's monism of the last decades (Perrons, 2001). Yet these turns have neither been fully conceptualised in theoretical terms or clearly transmitted in methodological ones. The interest for these new perspectives is boosted by those who address that spatial development literature has become too specialised and thus too narrow (see the argument about economic geography of Amin and Thrift, 2000) which actually fails to address and respond to the growing problems of modern capitalism (spatial inequalities). The centre of the debate and interest is (or should be) not in the methods applied or the qualitative- quantitative schism but on the ways different strands of the relevant literature conceptualise space. With that as a starting point the discussion is grounded on a strong basis which at the first instance looks promising for expanding and exploring the "relational" argument in the dimensions that still appear dull and fuzzy (methodology and methods, analysis of findings etc.). Before opening the discussion of how the literature on the relational approach views space it should be useful to comment on the non- relational perspective of current literature in the field of spatial development. The next section draws a brief account of how dominant strands from the contemporary academic and policy-making literature treat space. In the following section the relational perspective will be briefly analysed and grounded on the basis of its logic of space. Then the discussion will be carried on with the ways we transform the relational approach's logic in methods and analysis and what contradictions and problems this transformation poses.

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### **Space as a container of action**

Much of the current literature on spatial inequalities/development can be summarised under the broad field of New Economic Geography (hereafter NEG) and/ or Neoclassical Economic Geography. NEG starts from the neoclassical assumptions, regarding the agent, of utility maximization and use of modelling as the most favoured methodology in deriving conclusions using equilibrium analysis, as neoclassical economics do. One of the contemporary proponents in that field is Paul Krugman (1991a, 1991b, 1993) who emphasizes that agglomeration forces can be generated through the interaction of increasing returns and the effects of transport costs. Krugman argues that if some level of concentration of economic activity emerges in a city or region, the existence of agglomeration itself has lock-in effects and other economic agents will newly be attracted there. These can be regarded as positive lock-in effects. However, in other cases one can think that agglomeration would impede the evolution of economic structure of a region in the long run (see also Fujita & Krugman, 2004, Fujita et al, 1999, Krugman, 1991). So, space matters when transportation costs are been taken into consideration. Workers, especially high skilled, seem to migrate to regions and cities that will give them better wages assuming every time that the migrant workers have perfect information about the wages of each potential location. But *“the precise location”*, as Boschma & Frenken (2005; 10) emphasize *“does not matter as long as agents cluster somewhere in space (putty-clay geography)”*.

Location and space do matter not only in Krugman’s geographical economics but also in other streams of location theories such as those which deal with clusters. Porter’s famous cluster theory has its base in Marshall’s industrial districts. Marshall in his innovatory Principles of Economics (1890) and especially in the fourth book entitled “The Agents of Production: Land, Labour, and Capital and Organization” explains how the concentration of specialised industries is done in particular localities.

The ideas of Marshall have been augmented by scholars such as Porter (1998a, 1998b, 1994, 1990) who introduced his theory of clusters. The theory posits that by

grouping firms together, cluster analysis can reveal specializations of production chains in the local region. Thus, the key premise underlying cluster theory is that through the exchange of specialized information, increased productivity, innovation and new business formation may be achieved within the regional context. Rosenfeld (1995) defines a cluster as a loose, geographically bounded agglomeration of similar firms that together are able to achieve synergy. Firms “self-select” into clusters based on their mutual interdependencies in order to increase economic activity and facilitate business transactions.

Those two streams of theory on location [for the founders of Location Theory see also Isard (1956, 1960), Christaller (1933), Weber (1929) and von Thunen (1826)] may have many theoretical differences but they fall across and share the same epistemological approach that is logic positivism. This epistemological and thus methodological positivism is firstly constituted by the, unconscious most of the time, notion that space is “neutral”, or in other words they regard space as a container of human action. As Martin (1999; 78) argues *“agglomeration cannot predict why industrial localization and specialization will occur in particular places and not in others”*. Space exists in itself and for itself and it lacks depth; it is an empty dimension. *“The implication of this perspective was that activity and event and space were conceptually and physically separate from each other and only contingently related. Such a view of space decentred it from agency and meaning...the effects of distance and the varying potentialities of site locations could be objectively specified on one and the same spatial scale of measurement...the neutrality of this space resulted in its being divorced from any consideration of structures of power and domination”* (Tilley; 1994; 9). Moreover these positivistic views of space are coming from a total understanding of space (Shields, 1997) which is correlated with Euclidean geometry; *“a kind of absolute grid, within which objects are located and events occur”* (Curry, 1995; 5). Positivistic methodology, or as Elster (1978) points out the “methodological individualism” of NEG, seeks to provide answers by limiting the “variables” that cause and affect those answers. The measurable variables are limited and they include only these parameters that can be objectively measured. All the others (the social processes) remain hidden in the *ceteris paribus* myopic axiom. Granovetter (1992) argues that an “atomistic view of economic agents” leads to a very limited

understanding of their activities as *context* is neglected. Markussen (1999; 3), in the same line, emphasizes that “*processes (of actions) are not well defined and are abstracted from actor*”. The ontology and view of “space as container” of the “real world” contains only a part of that real world and thus the subsequent methodologies and outcomes fall into partiality. Barnes (2001) refers to these practices in quantitative regional science as fetishization. Gregory (1978) argues that the attempt of positivism is to form a social physics in a spatial context. These parts and processes that are not taken into consideration, as most of the time it is difficult or even impossible to objectively measure them, include, to name but a few, politics, institutions and power structures, culture and history. Krugman states that these messy factors should “best left to sociologists” but Martin (1999; 75) recognizes that these factors which are involved in spatial economic development are totally neglected in NEG which put on it “severe epistemological and ontological limits” that narrow the approach. Even concepts like that of history and time are misinterpreted. Krugman argues that history matters. But as Martin (ibid; 76) emphasizes “*the history “referred” to is not real history; there is no sense of the real and context-specific periods of time over which actual spatial agglomerations have evolved and in many cases dissolved. Instead in the locational models of the NEG the notion of time employed is that of abstract logical, or simulation, time*”.

At last, the NEG or regional science in general, treats regions as if they were the economic actors themselves having their own particular characteristics. However, as we will argue in the next section regions are not real actors, they are entities or better alterities (to highlight their physiognomic polymorphism), which are socially (re)constructed from the actors that live within there.

NEG is not the only field that treats space as a container of action but it is a dominant one in the current literature on spatial development. And the argument is not about positivistic methodology but it is about the logic and ontology of space that drives methodology and analysis in monistic interpretations and thus partiality. The counter argument against the latter is towards a holistic theoretical framework that understands “*the concrete spatial world as a synthesis of many determinations or the outcome of a multiplicity of social dynamics operating in different levels*” (Perrons, 2001, 211) and thus it is grounded on what we call relational perspective. It is an argument that has not been fully articulated and

conceptualised yet, as we argued before, but looks promising in epistemological terms; in what new dimensions it unveils for research. The approaches of how to work the relational idea vary considerably within the discipline and no dominant methodology exists. In the next few pages we will make an attempt to stress how the relational approach is seen and what the basic implications of this are for doing research.

### **The relational perspective**

Regarding space as a medium for action rather than as a container of it we see that action and space form a duality in time. Action is involved in space and cannot be divorced from it. Space exists within the events and activities. On the other hand, space influences these events and activities. As Tilley states, “*space is socially produced and different societies, groups and individuals act out their lives in different spaces...there is no space, only spaces. These spaces are always centred in relation to human agency and are amenable to reproduction or change because their constitution takes place as part of the day to day praxis of individuals and groups*” (Tilley, 1994; 10). Each of these spaces forms an *existent alterity*. This means that each space is a unique entity in time; it is not fixed (not even the relations within it) so it exists. Also, it is socially and historically produced so it is something unique, an alterity; each space has a unique historical trajectory as it is constituted by temporary agents that cannot be in two different spaces at the same time. “*A social space, rather than being uniform and forever the same, is constituted by differential densities of human experience, attachment and involvement. It is above all contextually constituted, providing particular settings for involvement and the creation of meanings*” (ibid; 11).

Doreen Massey, in her recent book, *For Space* (2005), gives a more tangible account about the alterity of space. Sharing the approach that space is a product of interrelations and that it is always under construction she goes further and she imagines space as “*the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity...if space is indeed the*

*product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive*". (p. 9) Everyone has their own trajectory, influenced and built by the information they receive in daily life, and that trajectory is unique. The spatial concentration of these heterogeneous trajectories constitutes a qualitative physiognomic polymorphism; an existent alterity. The matter here is to see the difference of space regarding other spaces which stems out of its uniqueness and not whether that space is a prosperous or a deprived one. This argument opens another about the right of that spatial uniqueness to be exercised and continued. We have seen plenty of examples of regions in the EU that lag behind and the policy-making community has made several attempts to aid these regions through certain funding schemes and programmes. After almost 30 years of EU regional aid (Structural funds, regional development funds etc) most of these regions remain deprived and regional inequalities still exist throughout the EU. The blame is not to be put in the planning of these schemes as in certain (mostly Northern EU) regions seemed to work well. But in the deprived ones (mostly Southern) some funding schemes proposed a new management/cultural ethos which seemed almost incompatible with the spatial (unique) social characteristics of each region. The result is that the agents of these regions couldn't adapt to that new cultural trajectory of planning as their inter-relational practices were *different*, and that this difference wasn't allowed to be exercised in that European power geometry. Only small programmes which took advantage of (and constituted through) that difference and thus mostly planned from below had success and were granted to be continued (see Leader I, II and Plus Initiative). The argument can be augmented with several examples towards spatial power relations and planning practices but this strategic-political dimension is not the aim of this paper although, the relational perspective literature should also include in its ontological analysis that fundamental dimension and to unpack it towards an explanation of difference. We then may think that one of the real problems behind uneven spatial development or regional inequalities is not the "uneven" but the power to exercise different patterns of spatial behaviour and even to dominate other spaces with them.



So, the duality of space and action entails a relational significance. Space is created through relations between agents and the space itself. Space, in a historical perspective, can also be seen as the mirror of spatial history as it entails in its planning, culture and economy previous practices. The issue of path-dependence arises not in the monistic interpretation of the QWERTY example (towards other choices) but as the current spatial product entails the previous ones. Space cannot be seen as an absolute grid anymore, neither as a surface. Its uniqueness rejects comparison as two alterities cannot be easily compared. What actually is important now, it is not the arithmetic result of a comparison but the analysis of that relational process that transforms or maintains space. In more detail, it is the power relations that dominate and guide spatial relations, the meanings (identities) that people attach to space and to its structures (rules and resources), and how these meanings sustain or transform space through praxis. As Massey and the Collective (1999, 13) state, “*relations*” in relational thinking are “*themselves relations of power*”. No hidden factors should exist. Everything plays a role inside that relation; from the physical space that wasn’t humanly created to the intentionally created structures of markets and from the local-bodily interrelation to the global network society. Everything is meaningful as citizens attach a meaning to everything they come across through senses. Language is the first expression of these meanings, actions then follow. We should also point out that there is no single truth and reality in a space. The coexistence of heterogeneous trajectories entails multiple realities. But dominant realities exist; capitalism and economic inequalities are two of them. However, the difference of the relational approach contra to the NEG (and other similar approaches) is that the former should not aim for universal spatial laws since this conceptualization views action as being embedded in specific (spatial) and unique contexts (Bathelt and Gluckler, 2003; 128). The following table summarises the previous arguments for the relational perspective in contrast with the approach that regards space as container of action.

*Table 1*

Space as container	Space as medium
Geometry	Context
Universal	Alterity
Absolute	Relational
Neutral	Empowered

### **The ontology of method**

The next inquiry regards the implications that the above priorities and their ontology put into the methodology of research. The intention here is not to discuss the actual methods but rather the way methodology should be. Seeing space as a medium for action through the relational approach, it gives the first implication about methodology. The researcher, in order to be able to catch that relation, should be a part of it. That means the researcher should participate in the space he/she investigates in order to experience the relations in question. In antithesis to the comfort research manner of econometrics and surveys the relational approach assumes that the researcher should have a relational position relative to his spatial study. Yeung (2002) has emphasised that the method of participant observation is central to the relational analysis. Moreover other methods such as interviews and analysis of texts should not be abandoned as the concepts of multiplicity and plurality need a more holistic approach in order to go as deep as we can in researching human behaviour and the relation with space. Perrons (2001) suggests a move towards a more holistic geography. This forms the second implication. Of course the multiple factors that constitute the duality of space and action cannot be captured in full by any methodology as there will always be factors that are neglected or the emphasis will be put on some of them and not in their total. However, holisticity should seek to accommodate into

research as many factors as it can, and at least it should be open; to multiple observations and interpretations as the focus is on open ended processes, in opposition with the closed theoretical and methodological assumptions of the positivistic individualism that fall a-priori in partiality. To put it simply, as we stressed before, contra to the unique reality positivism highlights, the relational approach should at least acknowledge that no single reality exists. There are multiple realities and multiple factors that affect them. This alters not only the methodology but mainly the way we should analyse and interpret findings and the way we re-construct theories. In order to get there, the researcher should abandon the idea of seeing himself as the supervisor of the world; he should abandon the comfort throne of individual positivism and ground himself as participant; whose answers and interpretations are only a part of the whole. Acknowledging this we change the way that research is conducted and the way that findings are analysed. Perrons (ibid, 211-2) argues that *“in order to develop a theoretical (holistic) framework, it is important to understand the concrete spatial world as a synthesis of many determinations or the outcome of a multiplicity of social dynamics operating in different levels. Consequently, a range of economic and social theories need to be drawn upon and synthesised in different spatial context.”* An implication of this is that no longer should the firm be regarded as an independent entity but it should be researched and analysed along with the firm’s spatial connections like the local institutions and also the relations with the historical continuity of certain processes (traditions, behaviours). All these should be human centred giving a greater role to agency. However, as Boggs and Rantisi (2003) point out the focus of analysis should not be on actors per se, rather we should view actors as interdependent subjects whose identities and resource capabilities are co-constituted by their relations with other actors.

A question that rises here is about the use of techniques of the other bank of viewing space that is positivism. To conceptualise it, the question should be “Is holistic really holistic when we abandon positivism and its results?”; the answer is not simple. It seems that if we don’t take into consideration the applications of positivism again we fail to see the whole picture. The question can be more conceptualised and augmented if we try to think whether the approach of space as a container of action can be accommodated in the relational approach of seeing

space as a medium of action. The answer then becomes fuzzier, can we actually use qualitative and quantitative methods in a single piece of research at the same time regarding the relational approach without reducing the relational character of the research? A thought is to use quantitative techniques and their results not to compare spaces but as milestones in doing research and in selecting case studies. We seek to explore why deprived regions or locales are deprived and how prosperous spaces have done it so well. One of the needs of doing this is that quantitative accounts have already been inserted into our spatial lives; whether we support their use and existence or not. A citizen of the deprived Southern Italy (i.e. in terms of RGDP and unemployment) may regard himself and his community as deprived only because the message he gets from Eurostat and the EU positivists-analysts speaks about deprivation. And he may insert this meaning in his life trajectory and this meaning may (or may not) play a role in his economic actions and future decisions. It is a matter of the power relations between him and the EU institutions; a matter of the relational approach we take advantage of. In doing research in a relational and holistic approach is a matter of capturing the observed realities of the space in question. Furthermore, quantitative data should be dialectically elaborated with that of qualitative techniques in a single piece of research. In the same direction Rokos ( , 1980, 1998) demarcates the “holon”<sup>2</sup> from the “total”. He argues that the physical and socio-economic reality is constituted by the unbreakable and dialectic unity of the multiple phenomena and relations in time-space. For this it (reality) must be regarded as a “holon” and not as a “total” of distinctive, independent and autonomous parts where we add them together in a mechanic way. Therefore we need a dialectical unity (synthesis) of the interrelation of methods and not their total suma ( ). So the synthesis of methods forms another dimension of doing research through a relational perspective.

## Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> The term *holon* is coming from the ancient Greek language and it means the “everything” (in distinction with the “total”). A derivative of *holon* is the word *holistico-* holistic.

This paper aims to form an attempt to conceptualise the relational significance of space and the implications of this significance in research. It doesn't employ a very particular perspective in organising and conducting research; instead it proposes how the ontology of method should be. There is a growing need and a shift in the spatial development literature towards a relational perspective. Space is seen as a medium for action. Action and space form a duality in time and also together they form specific contexts with a spatial significance. Their significance is constituted in the uniqueness of every space. What actually matters for the researcher is the deep exploration of the actions that are embedded in that spatial context. The research questions should be about processes and the data collection should be guided by a holistic perspective in respect of the multiplicity and the alterity of space itself. The analytical focus then is on all these tangible and non-tangible factors that constitute the space unique in time, without a priory privileging of them. They can be historical facts embedded in current entrepreneurial behaviours, spatial ideologies and distinct institutions that foster a different praxis. As Yeung (2005) emphasises *"in particular, the approach analyses the relational complementarity and specificity of these actors, assets and structures – not their mere presence or absence. This methodological specification allows for an analysis of why some actors (e.g. firms and unions) are more tied to specific regions and therefore likely to contribute to regional development. It also helps to identify the relational advantage of regions when a particular set of heterogeneous relations (relational geometry) might be more beneficial to one region and less effectual in another region"*.

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