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Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph

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Geographers have long spoken of the importance of *place* as the unique focus distinguishing geography from other disciplines. Astronomy has the heavens, History has time, and Geography has place. A major question that geographers must sooner or later ask, however, is “What exactly is place?” Is it merely a synonym for location, or a unique ensemble of nature and culture, or could it be something more?

Beginning in the early 1970s, geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1974), Anne Buttimer (1976), and Edward Relph (1976, 1981, 1993) grew dissatisfied with what they felt was a philosophically and experientially anemic definition of place. These thinkers, sometimes called “humanistic geographers,” probed place as it plays an integral role in human experience. One influential result of this new approach was Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness*, a book that continues to have significant conceptual and practical impact today, both inside and outside geography.

In the early 1970s, Relph was a doctoral student at the University of Toronto, working on his dissertation concerning the relationship between Canadian national identity and the symbolic landscapes of the Canadian Shield, especially those represented by lakes and forests (Relph 1996). As his project progressed, he became dissatisfied with the lack of philosophical sophistication given to the definition of place. Relph found this supposed conceptual pillar of the discipline to be superficial and incomplete, especially in terms of the importance of place in ordinary human life. How could one study place attachment, sense of place, or place identity without a clear understanding of the depth and complexity of place as it is experienced and fashioned by real people in real places? Eventually, Relph scrapped his Canadian Shield study and shifted focus to a broader look at the nature and meaning of place as it plays an integral part in the lives of human beings.

A Phenomenology of Place and Space

Published in 1976, *Place and Placelessness* is a substantive revision of Relph’s 1973 University of Toronto doctoral dissertation in Geography. As he emphasizes at the start of the book, his research method is “a phenomenology of place” (Relph 1976, pp. 4-7). Phenomenology is the interpretive study of human experience. The aim is to examine and to clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences as they are known in everyday life but typically unnoticed beneath the level of conscious awareness (Seamon 2000). One of phenomenology’s great strengths is seeking out what is obvious but unquestioned and thereby questioning it. To uncover the obvious, we must step back from any taken-for-granted attitudes and assumptions, whether in the realm of everyday experience or in the realm of conceptual perspectives and explanations, including the scientific. In *Place and Placelessness*, Relph steps back to call into question the

taken-for-granted nature of place and its significance as an inescapable dimension of human life and experience.

Relph begins *Place and Placelessness* with a review of space and its relationship to place. He argues that space is not a void or an isometric plane or a kind of container that holds places. Instead, he contends that, to study the relationship of space to a more experientially-based understanding of place, space too must be explored in terms of how people experience it. Although Relph says that there are countless types and intensities of spatial experience, he delineates a heuristic structure grounded in “a continuum that has direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at the other...” (Relph 1976, p. 9). On one hand, he identifies modes of spatial experience that are instinctive, bodily, and immediate—for example, what he calls pragmatic space, perceptual space, and existential space. On the other hand, he identifies modes of spatial experience that are more cerebral, ideal, and intangible—for example, planning space, cognitive space, and abstract space. Relph describes how each of these modes of space-as-experienced has varying intensities in everyday life. For example, existential space—the particular taken-for-granted environmental and spatial constitution of one’s everyday world grounded in culture and social structure—can be experienced in a highly self-conscious way as when one is overwhelmed by the beauty and sacredness of a Gothic cathedral; or in a tacit, unself-conscious way as one sits in the office day after day paying little attention to his or her surroundings.

Although the spatial modes that Relph identifies may each play a particular role in everyday experience, Relph emphasizes that in reality these modes are not mutually exclusive but all part and parcel of human spatial experience as it is a lived, indivisible whole. For example, he explains that cognitive conceptions of space understood through maps may help to form our perceptual knowledge, which in turn may color our day-to-day spatial encounters as we move through real-world places. Though a radical idea in the 1970s, Relph’s conclusion that space is heterogeneous and infused with many different lived dimensions is largely taken for granted in geographical studies today as researchers speak of such spatial modes as sacred space, gendered space, commodified space, and the like.

One of Relph’s central accomplishments in *Place and Placelessness* is his preserving an intimate conceptual engagement between space and place. Many geographers speak of both concepts but ultimately treat the two as separate or give few indications as to how they are related existentially and conceptually. For Relph, the unique quality of place is its power to order and to focus human intentions, experiences, and actions spatially. Relph thus sees space and place as dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context.

Depth of Place

A central reason for Relph’s exhaustive study of place is his firmly held belief that such understanding might contribute to the maintenance and restoration of existing places and the making of new places (also see Relph 1981, 1993). He argues that, without a thorough understanding of place as it has human significance, one would find it difficult to describe why a particular place is special and impossible to know how to repair existing places in need of mending. In short, before we can properly prescribe, we must first learn how to accurately describe—a central aim of phenomenological research.

In examining place in depth, Relph focuses on people's identity *of* and *with* place. By the identity *of* a place, he refers to its "persistent sameness and unity which allows that [place] to be differentiated from others" (Relph 1976, p. 45). Relph describes this persistent identity in terms of three components: (1) the place's physical setting; (2) its activities, situations, and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place.

Relph emphasizes, however, that place identity defined in this threefold way is not sufficiently pivotal or deep existentially because, most essentially, places are "significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world" (Relph 1976, p. 141). If places are to be more thoroughly understood, one needs a language whereby we can identify particular place experiences in terms of the intensity of meaning and intention that a person and place hold for each other. For Relph, the crux of this lived intensity is identity *with* place, which he defines through the concept of *insideness*—the degree of attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place.

Insideness and Outsideness

Relph's elucidation of insideness is perhaps his most original contribution to the understanding of place because he effectively demonstrates that the concept is the core lived structure of place as it has meaning in human life. If a person feels inside a place, he or she is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed. Relph suggests that the more profoundly inside a place a person feels, the stronger will be his or her identity with that place.

On the other hand, a person can be separate or alienated from place, and this mode of place experience is what Relph calls *outsideness*. Here, people feel some sort of lived division or separation between themselves and world—for example, the feeling of homesickness in a new place. The crucial phenomenological point is that outsideness and insideness constitute a fundamental dialectic in human life and that, through varying combinations and intensities of outsideness and insideness, different places take on different identities for different individuals and groups, and human experience takes on different qualities of feeling, meaning, ambience, and action.

The strongest sense of place experience is what Relph calls *existential insideness*—a situation of deep, unself-conscious immersion in place and the experience most people know when they are at home in their own community and region. The opposite of existential insideness is what he labels *existential outsideness*—a sense of strangeness and alienation, such as that often felt by newcomers to a place or by people who, having been away from their birth place, return to feel strangers because the place is no longer what it was when they knew it earlier.

In his book, Relph discusses seven modes of insideness and outsideness (no doubt there are more) grounded in various levels of experiential involvement and meaning. The value of these modes, particularly for self-awareness, is that they apply to specific place experiences yet provide a conceptual structure in which to understand those experiences in broader, more explicit terms.

Placelessness

In the last half of the book, Relph examines ways in which places may be experienced *authentically* or *inauthentically* (terms borrowed from phenomenological and existential philosophy). An *authentic* sense of place is “a direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places—not mediated and distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions” (Relph 1976, p. 64).

Individuals and groups may create a sense of place either unself-consciously or deliberately. Thus, because of constant use, a nondescript urban neighborhood can be as authentic a place as Hellenic Athens or the Gothic cathedrals—the latter both examples, for Relph, of places generated consciously. Relph argues that, in our modern era, an authentic sense of place is being gradually overshadowed by a less authentic attitude that he called *placelessness*: “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (Relph 1976, Preface).

Relph suggests that, in general, placelessness arises from *kitsch*—an uncritical acceptance of mass values, or *technique*—the overriding concern with efficiency as an end in itself. The overall impact of these two forces, which manifest through such processes as mass communication, mass culture, and central authority, is the “undermining of place for both individuals and cultures, and the casual replacement of the diverse and significant places of the world with anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments” (Relph 1976, p. 143).

Influence of *Place and Placelessness*

Since Relph's book was published, there has been a spate of popular studies on the nature of place. In addition, thinkers from a broad range of conceptual perspectives—from positivist and neo-Marxist to post-structuralist and social-constructivist—have drawn on the idea of place, though understanding it in different ways and using it for different theoretical and practical ends (Creswell 2004; Seamon 2000).

Scholarly interest in *Place and Placelessness* has steadily increased over the years. According to citation indices in the sciences, social sciences, and the arts & humanities, the book has been referenced in scholarly journals a total of 357 times from 1977 to 2005. In the first ten years, there was an average of some twelve citations per year; since then, references have steadily increased to thirty-six entries in 2004. Geographers have cited the book most since 1989 (142 entries), though scholars in environmental studies also demonstrate strong interest (118 entries). In addition, the book has been cited by researchers in psychology (forty-three times), sociology (forty-two), urban studies (thirty), planning (twenty-one), health (ten), and anthropology (nine).

To provide the reader with an indication of how Relph's ideas in *Place and Placelessness* have been used as a major conceptual mooring point by other researchers, we highlight three examples—one book, one article, and one dissertation (for a more extensive list, see Seamon 2000). Published two years after Relph's book, geographer David Seamon's *A Geography of the Lifeworld* is the first major study to draw on Relph's notion of insideness and to demonstrate how it could be extended phenomenologically to examine a topic that Seamon calls *everyday environmental experience*—the

sum total of peoples' firsthand involvements with the geographical world in which they live (Seamon 1979, pp. 15-16). Seamon considers how, through experienced dimensions like body, feelings, and thinking, the quality of insideness is expressed geographically and environmentally. Seamon's work illustrates how Relph's phenomenology of place offers a field of conceptual clarity from which other researchers might embark on their own phenomenological explorations.

A second study illustrating the conceptual potential of *Place and Placelessness* is landscape architect V. Frank Chaffin's research, which focuses on Isle Brevelle, a 200-year-old river community on the Cane River of Louisiana's Natchitoches Parish (Chaffin 1989). Through an interpretive reading of the region's history and geology, in-depth interviewing of residents, and his own personal encounters with Isle Brevelle's landscape while canoeing on the Cane River, Chaffin aims to reach an *empathetic insideness* with this place—in other words, he attempts to find ways to be open to and thereby to understand more deeply Isle Brevelle's unique sense of place. One central aspect of Chaffin's encounter with this place is his unexpected realization that the Cane River is not an edge that separates its two banks but, rather, a seam that gathers the two sides together as one community and one place.

A third study using themes from *Place and Placelessness* for conceptual mooring is psychologist Louise Million's dissertation (Million 1992), which examines phenomenologically the experience of five rural Canadian families forced to leave their ranches because of the construction of a reservoir dam in southern Alberta. Drawing on Relph's modes of insideness and outsideness, Million identifies the central lived qualities of what she calls *involuntary displacement*—the families' experience of forced relocation and resettlement. Making use of in-depth interviews with the five families, she demonstrates how place is prior to involuntary displacement with the result that this experience can be understood existentially as a forced journey marked by eight stages—(1) *becoming uneasy*, (2) *struggling to stay*, (3) *having to accept*, (4) *securing a settlement*, (5) *searching for the new*, (6) *starting over*, (7) *unsettling reminders*, and (8) *wanting to resettle*. In delineating the lived stages in the process of losing place and attempting to resettle, Million's study demonstrates how Relph's modes of insideness and outsideness can be used developmentally to examine place experience and identity as they strengthen, weaken, or remain more or less continuous over time.

Criticisms of *Place and Placelessness*

Broadly, one finds three major criticisms of *Place and Placelessness*: that it is essentialist; out of touch with what places really are today; and structured around simplistic dualisms that misrepresent and limit the range of place experience, particularly the possibility of a "global sense of place" (Massey 1997, p. 323). The essentialist claim has been brought forth especially by Marxists (e.g., Peet 1998, p. 63) and social constructivists (e.g., Creswell 2004, p. 26, pp. 30-33), who argue that Relph presupposes and claims an invariant and universal human condition that will be revealed only when all "non-essentials," including historical, cultural, and personal qualities, are stripped away, leaving behind some inescapable core of human experience. These critics point out that, in focusing on the experience of place as a foundational existential quality and structure, Relph ignores specific temporal, social, and individual circumstances that shape particular places and particular individuals' and groups' experience of them.

This criticism misunderstands the basic phenomenological recognition that there are different dimensions of human experience and existence that *all must be incorporated* in a thorough understanding of human and societal phenomena. These dimensions include: (a) one's unique personal situation—e.g., one's gender, physical and intellectual endowments, degree of ableness, and personal likes and dislikes; (b) one's unique historical, social, and cultural situation—e.g., the era and geographical locale in which one lives, his or her economic and political circumstances, and his or her educational, religious, and societal background; and (c) one's situation as a typical human being who sustains and reflects a typical human world—e.g., Relph's claim that place is an integral lived structure in human experience.

What is exciting and dynamic about Relph's broad conclusions regarding place—which first of all relate to dimension (c)—is their potential as starting points for more specific phenomenological investigations of (a) and (b) as exemplified, for example, in the real-world studies of Chaffin and Million highlighted above. Chaffin's research demonstrates how Relph's broad principles can inform and direct phenomenological research focusing on the social and cultural dimensions of one specific place—the Cain River community. Similarly, in her study of the displaced Alberta ranchers, Million illustrates how Relph's general principles and conclusions can guide empirical research in regard to specific individuals and families in a specific place, time, and situation. In turn, Chaffin and Million's more grounded discoveries clarify and amplify Relph's broader claims.

In short, Relph's phenomenology of place points toward a conceptual and methodological reciprocity between the general and the specific, between the foundational and the particular, between the conceptual and the lived. This convincing “fit” among levels is a hallmark of the best phenomenology.

A Lack of Conceptual Sophistication?

In a commentary written for *Place and Placelessness*' twentieth anniversary, Relph (1996) suggested that, in hindsight, another major weaknesses of *Place and Placelessness* was its lack of conceptual sophistication, particularly its straightforward use of dialectical opposites as a way to conceptualize place experience—insideness/outsideness, place/placelessness, authenticity/inauthenticity, and so forth. One result is that critics have often misunderstood Relph's point of view, claiming he favored places over placelessness, insideness over outsideness, authentic over inauthentic places, rootedness over mobility, and place as a static, bounded site over place as a dynamic, globally-connected process (Cesswell 2004, Massey 1997, Peet 1998).

If, however, one reads the book carefully and draws on his or her own personal experiences of place for evidence and clarification, he or she realizes the extraordinary coverage and flexibility of Relph's conceptual structure. Especially through the continuum of insideness and outsideness, he provides a language that allows for a precise designation of the particular experience of a particular person or group in relation to the particular place in which they find themselves. Relph also provides a terminology for describing how and why the same place can be experienced differently by different individuals (e.g., the long-time resident vs. the newcomer vs. the researcher who studies the place) or how, over time, the same person can experience the same place differently at different times (e.g., the home and community that suddenly seem so different when one's significant other dies).

As Relph's book strikingly demonstrates, a major strength of phenomenological insights is their provision of a conceptual language that allows one to separate from taken-for-granted everyday experience—the *lifeworld* as it is called phenomenologically (Buttimer 1976, Seamon 1979, 2000). Too often, researchers lose sight of the need to move outside lifeworld descriptions and terminology, and the result is confusion or murkiness as to the exact phenomenon they are attempting to understand.

For example, in feminist and cultural-studies research that focuses on negative and traumatic images of place (e.g., Rose 1993, pp. 53-5), an emphasis is sometimes given to how family violence generates homes where family members feel victimized and insecure. Too often, the post-structural and social-constructivist conclusion is to call into question the entire concept of home and place and to suggest that they might be nostalgic, essentialist notions that need vigorous societal and political modification—perhaps even substitution—in postmodern society.

Relph's modes of insiderness and outsiderness point to an alternative understanding. The problem is not home and place but a conceptual conflation for which Relph's language provides a simple corrective: the victim's experience should not be interpreted as a lack of at-homeness but, rather, as one mode of existential outsiderness, which in regard to one's most intimate place—the home—is particularly undermining and potentially life-shattering.

Relph's notion of existential outsiderness allows us to keep the experiences of home and violation distinct. Through his lived language of place, we can say more exactly that domestic violence, whether in regard to women *or* men, is a situation where a place that typically fosters the strongest kind of existential insiderness has become, paradoxically, a place of overwhelming existential outsiderness. The lived result must be profoundly destructive.

The short-term phenomenological question is how these victims can be helped to regain existential insiderness. The longer-term question is what qualities and forces in our society lead to a situation where the existential insiderness of home and at-homeness devolves into hurtfulness and despair. Something is deeply wrong, and one cause of the problem may be the very problem itself—i.e., the growing disruption and disintegration of places and insiderness at many different scales of experience, from home to neighborhood to city to nation (Fullilove 2004; Relph 1993).

How today to have insiderness and place when change is constant, society is diverse, and so many of the traditional "truths" no longer make sense is one of the crucial questions of our age. *Place and Placelessness* offers no clear answer, but it does provide an innovative language for thinking about the question.

Dwelling and Journey

Another concern that some critics voiced regarding *Place and Placelessness* is that it favors home, center, and dwelling over horizon, periphery, and journey (Cresswell 2004, Massey 1997, Peet 1998). As Relph (1996) says in his twentieth-anniversary commentary, he was accused of emphasizing the positive qualities of place and ignoring or minimizing negative qualities—e.g., the possibility that place can generate parochialism, xenophobia, and narrow-mindedness (also see Relph 2000). Again, a close reading of the book reveals a flexibility of expression—a recognition that an excess of place can lead to a provincialism and callousness for outsiders just as an excess of

journey can lead to a loss of identity or an impartial relativity that allows for commitment to nothing. The broader point is that, in the book's lived dialectics (center/horizon, place/placelessness, and so forth), there is a wonderful resilience of conceptual interrelationship that is another hallmark of the best phenomenology.

In his twentieth-anniversary commentary, Relph (1996) also points out that some critics mistakenly read the book as a nostalgic paean to pre-modern times and places (e.g., Peet 1998). How could the kind of authentic places that he emphasized exist in our postmodern times of cyberspace, continuous technological change, human diversity, and geographical and social mobility?

This criticism, of course, ignores a central conclusion of *Place and Placelessness*: that regardless of the historical time or the geographical, technological, and social situation, *people will always need place* because having and identifying with place are integral to what and who we are as human beings (Casey 1993, Malpas 1999). From this point of view, the argument that postmodern society, through technological and cultural correctives, can now ignore place is questionable existentially and potentially devastating practically, whether in terms of policy, design, or popular understanding (Relph 1993).

Instead, the crucial question that both theory and practice should ask is how a “progressive” sense of place and insideness can be made *even in the context of* our relativist, constantly-changing post-modern world (Cresswell 2004, Horan 2000, Massey 1997). Twenty years ago, Relph was one of the first thinkers to broach this question, which he explores in greater detail in his later *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography* (Relph 1981). Today, due to Relph's penetrating insights and the work of a small coterie of thinkers and practitioners like Christopher Alexander (2002-05), Mindy Fullilove (2004), Bill Hillier (1996), Thomas Horan (2000), Daniel Kemmis (1995), and Robert Mugerauer (1994), we have the start of an answer to this question phrased in a phenomenological language (Seamon 2004) that interprets place in a way considerably different from the post-structural, social-constructivist, and neo-Marxist perspectives that currently dominate academic discourse on place (Cresswell 2004).

In spite of the dramatic societal and environmental changes that our world faces today, place continues to be significant both as a vigorous conceptual structure as well as an irrevocable part of everyday human life (Horan 2000). This is not to suggest that the world must or could return to a set of distinct places all different, unconnected, and more or less unaware of each other. In today's globally-linked society, place independence is in many ways impossible (Cresswell 2004, Relph 2000). More so, the importance of place and locality must be balanced with an awareness of and connections to other places and global needs (Massey 1997). The point is that an empathetic and compassionate understanding of the worlds beyond our own places may be best grounded in a love of a particular place to which I myself belong. In this way, we may recognize that what we need in our everyday world has parallels in the worlds of others (Relph 1981, 1993).

Place and Placelessness is a remarkable demonstration of the potential conceptual and practical power of place, which, by its very nature, gathers worlds spatially and environmentally, marking out centers of human action, intention, and meaning that, in turn, help make place (Casey 1993, Malpas 1999). In many ways, the continuing dissolution of places and insideness in the world helps to explain the escalating erosion of civility and civilization, in the West and elsewhere. Relph's *Place*

and *Placelessness* first pointed to this dilemma some thirty years ago and is today more relevant than ever.

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