

Notas sobre el lugar

desde el punto de vista de la geograficidad

Notes about place from a geographicity standpoint

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Resumen

Este artículo es un ensayo sobre el concepto de lugar a través del lente de la geograficidad. Sobre la base de Dardel, Relph y Tuan, tenemos la intención de demostrar que los lugares de nuestra vida hacen mucho más que apoyar a nuestros comportamientos, deseos, sentimientos y expectativas, ya que, al igual que nuestros amigos, compañeros, colegas y familiares, un lugar nos puede cambiar y dar calidad de vida, conectándose con nuestra propia existencia. Dos lugares específicos de la propia experiencia del autor se presentan como ejemplos de cómo los lugares se mezclan con nuestras experiencias. Al final, este ensayo se ha escrito para apoyar la hipótesis de que todo el mundo puede encontrar sus lugares significativos.

Palabras clave: lugar; Dardel; Geografía Humanística.

Abstract

This paper is an essay regarding the concept of place through the lens of geographicity. Based on Dardel, Relph and Tuan, we intend to demonstrate that the places of our lives do much more than just support our behaviors, desires, feelings and expectations because, just like our friends, companions, colleagues and family, a place involves personal change and it offers quality to life, connecting itself to the core of our own existence. Two specific places of the author's very own experience are presented as examples of how places do blend with our experiences. At the end, this paper was written to support the hypothesis that everyone can meet their meaningful places.

key words: place; Dardel; humanistic geography.

Notes about place from a geographicity standpoint¹

In the small world of each person places are more than simple entities that provide the physical environment where the drama of life happens. Some places are symbols for lived experiences, centers loaded with meanings. And as such, places are attached to the core of human existence² (Godkin, 1985: 242).

It is more than common to hear someone stating that when it comes to sharing an experience what really matter are the people that come along, regardless of where one is. The fact is that most individuals who claim this are planning 'where' to go during the Holydays or selecting the 'location' of his/her wedding or birthday party, the 'whereabouts' of the new apartment... We do agree: people with whom we share our journey on Earth do make our existence richer. Nevertheless, the *place* where we make it happen has an equal fundamental role when it comes to appraising our experience and how we feel. What we intend to demonstrate throughout this paper is that the places of our lives do much more than just support our behaviors, desires, feelings and expectations because, just like our friends, companions, colleagues and family, a place undergoes change and it gives quality to life, connecting itself, just like Godkin (1985: 242) stated above, "to the core of human existence".

Thus, we infer that people relate to places in a way that is very similar to the relationship one have with others. Maybe it was Dardel³ (2011), in the early 1950s, the first to alert us about this complicity we have with places on Earth. From the perspective of *geographicity*, a field that studies the sense of the experiences with places and the human perception about the place one inhabits, this author sought to understand the disgust, aversion and/or fear we have for a whole city or for a simple street, but he also sought for the close ties that bind us to a neighborhood or a square, for instance.

Dardel (2011: 33) started off from the idea about the geographical reality, stating that this should not be considered as a simple object, wherein the "geographical science assumes that the world is geographically known, that humans feel and know they are bond to the Earth and are being called to be held in their earthly condition". Geographicity refers, therefore, to this link with the planet and that it is understood as something concrete, while sharpened by a strong emotional feeling. This is why to think from

a geographicity viewpoint is to recognize that a place greatly matters in the quality of everyday experience, because a place is not only where we live, but it is part of our life; it is not just a geometric area with defined boundaries, but also unique in its own name and characteristics. This means that we can all name and fully describe at least one country or city or street, store, club, park, a room we are fond of... or a place we just as well dislike or even fear.

For me, geographicity was empirically revealing itself, as I could observe and understand the importance of places in the quality of my own earthly experience. Actually, I have started to better grasp this when I moved to the big city of Sao Paulo and I was welcomed into a very distinguished district named *Mooca*. It was like one could almost touch its warmness and that was a feeling that just had to be shared. Not far from *Mooca*, another emotional bond was established with São Paulo's Historic Center. Its history and collective sense of homeness, work and daily life experienced in this place had to be jotted down so people could reflect upon this place and perhaps go beyond its obviousness: it is not just an old district full of homeless people and popular commerce. So I made sure to highlight the meanings of those experiences in which the sense of place became alive, recording them through papers published in Brazilian journals (Fortunato, 2012; 2014; 2015; Fortunato *et al.*, 2011).

As follows, these experiences show that a place is much more than a simple scenario of events. From the phenomenological perspective, Relph (1976a) confirmed this idea by refusing the Man-Earth duality, taking a place further than its spatial location, considering it as part of the experience and extension of the individual, becoming a source for safety and belonging. For this author, the recognition of a place is idiosyncratic and it is related to a particular and metaphorical reading of the environment where the meanings are assigned symbolically and emotionally, often without the need for any concrete ballast in the physical environment to justify the affection and assigned values. Ergo, a place is built by experience, establishing a sense of complicity and mutual responsibilities of care and protection. Place is involvement and acceptance, being recognized by the feeling of being at home ... As Relph (1976b: 141) have stated: "*Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world. They are defined less by unique locations, landscape, and communities than by the focusing of experiences and intentions onto particular settings. Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. They are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound*

centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. Indeed our relationships with places are just as necessary, varied, and sometimes perhaps just as unpleasant, as our relationships with other people.”

It is important to clarify that the sense of place does not always equate to a nurturing or a romanticized description of the experience because, as cores of meanings, some places may trigger disaffection and disgust. We must also remember that one place may even awake in a single individual affection and repulsion; or it can be an extremely affective place that becomes aversive due to the quality of a few experiences lived there, and vice versa. This is why geographicity is founded on a phenomenological basis, on which every experience must be considered unique, including those developed in our favorite places where we feel quite safe.

In addition to remembering that interactions with the places are not always pleasant, Relph (1976b: 82) expressed concern about the increase in non-authentic attitudes toward places, wherein *“an inauthentic attitude to place is essentially no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of the deep and symbolic significances of places and no appreciation of their identities”*. In the author’s view, such attitudes, developed without the perception of symbols and meanings of place, imply a kind of generalized alienation of the very meaning of life, because it obscures the sense of place. From this finding emerged, then, the concept of ‘placelessness’, in reference to meaningless places, bonding or authenticity. This concept is not about fear or hatred of a place, but the indifference that can be understood as something like ‘I know nothing about the place where I am and, frankly, I do not care’.

Thus, when considering the human need for places and our connections with their symbols, meanings and values, the idea of placelessness becomes a blunt warning, after all, without places, regrets Relph, the capacity and the variety of human experiences are left limited to mere repetition, or even only to survival and a tedious and insipid life. Hence Relph’s (1976b: 146) aphorism: *“whether the world we live in has a placeless geography or a geography of significant places, the responsibility for it is ours alone”*. From my standpoint, this responsibility had to be both accepted and taken. In this matter, the safety felt at Mooca, my neighborhood in São Paulo, had to be shared for I was actually witnessing its entire warm embrace being taken away for its landscape was turning into just another indistinct district with very tall buildings: many of its old factory edifices are being demolished, making room for modern home and office complexes. This progress is not only destroying the environment, but just as well it is ‘devouring’ the collective memory of its inhabitants (Fortunato, 2012).

Another way of taking responsibility for a place is devoting time to really understanding it, which means going back its history, getting acquainted with its most respectful happenings and people, and describing it in all of its excellence and even its flaws... I did that with a very special place, the cornerstone of Sao Paulo, located in its very Historic Center: a place named ‘Pateo do Collegio’, which was fully scanned and also ‘wooded’ in my doctoral dissertation (Fortunato, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective that is especially similar to Dardel’s geographicity, Tuan (1983) outlines a place as a center of meaning and a specific location, which is valued individually and/or collectively. These values, he clarifies, are built on experience, which comes to attitudes, cognitive components such as memory and perception, and affective elements, like emotion. According to the author: *“Human places vary greatly in size. An armchair by the fireside is a place, but so is the nation-state. Small places can be known through direct experience, including the intimate senses of smell and touch. A large region such as the nation-state is beyond most people’s direct experience, but it can be transformed into place - a focus of passionate loyalty -through symbolic means of art, education, and politics How a mere space becomes an intensely human place is a task for the humanistic geographer; it appeals to such distinctively humanist interest as the nature of experience, the quality of the emotional bond to physical objects, and the role of concepts and symbols in the creation of place identity.”* (Tuan, 1976: 269).

This extensive quote carries key concepts and the fundamental basis of a geographical thought that helps us understand what we do on Earth, and the reasons that lead us to our personal behavior, which are only the visible part of a long submerged process involving cognition, memory, emotions and feelings. The above quotation also helps to clarify this internal process, demonstrating, from the examples given, that place is very personal (even when shared), much more emotional than concrete, more felt and experienced than observed and rationalized. So, a place may be the favorite chair resting the body, as well as it can be a vast territory, which is not known in whole, but that it is loved and protected, such as the nation-state. Nonetheless, a place can also be the childhood home, a square, a room ..., and the sense of place can be aroused by everyday experience and/or by memory, be it individual and/or collective.

In this manner, Tuan (1976) wanted to demonstrate that the symbolic contents are as strong as the experience in creating the sense of place ... Just as there are times when the experience can be indirectly lived by the memory that recovers the places, as are the example of notorious historical monuments, or natural emotional moments to visit the old house whe-

re was born and raised, for example, one's paternal grandfather, allowing the individual to better understand his or her own history and therefore their very own self. Hence the author's claim about the task of a humanistic geographer being the research on emotion, symbols, and experience in the sense of place. How do people experience delight of body and spirit within places? How do those feelings deeply connect us with a given place?

These were questions that prompted the development of what Tuan (1976: 272) named as "*distinctive humanistic approach*", which is precisely "*to describe the quality of the emotion experienced in specific cases*" or, better, in specific places. This author deals with the interpretation of complex human experiences in their contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies. Experiences that lie, mainly, on what is symbolic about the places of human life. The task of the humanist geographer, explains Tuan (1976: 273), is to show "*how the place is a concept and a shared feeling*", and its contribution is to "*suggest ways in which a sense of place can be emphasized*".

From this point of view we can therefore strengthen the idea that the relationship with places is very similar to the relationship with another person, because knowing a place suggests knowing its history and its specific features which give its identity. This becomes evident when Tuan (1975: 152) states that "*to know a place fully means both to understand it in an abstract way and to know it as one person knows another*", ratifying the idea that places are as important as people in the sense of our own existence.

Place ... meaning center... basis of the experience ... The sense of place is built on the direct and/or symbolic experience, involving feelings of well-being, joy, fear, disgust... meaning that it lies also on the updating of the past by memory, whether individual or collective. Small places and reserved, as the bedroom... huge places and unknown to the fullest, as the country in which we live ... ephemeral and transient places ... Places ... Place ... "*core of human existence*."

This is certainly inconclusive but, at our very best, we can properly state that a place is not just there for it can be found there... And just like I have claimed 'Mooca' and 'Pateo do Collegio' as my places, I am quite certain that everyone can meet their very own meaningful places.

Notes

1. I acknowledge Guilherme Fortunato for reviewing and offering quality comments on the draft paper.
2. The original text is in Spanish: *En el pequeño mundo de cada persona los lugares son algo más que unas simples entidades que proporcionan el escenario físico donde se desarrolla el drama de la vida. Algunos son símbolos de experiencias, centros cargados de una gran significación. Como tales, están unidos al núcleo de la existencia humana.*
3. Dardel wrote in French. His book was translated into Portuguese in 2011 by Professor Werther Holzer from the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. For this paper, all passages that were quote were taken from the Portuguese version and converted to English.
- * O autor é doutor em Geografia pela Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Rio Claro/SP. Líder do Núcleo de Estudos Transdisciplinares em Ensino, Ciência, Cultura e Ambiente (NuTECCA). Editor da revista Hipótese e coeditor da Revista Brasileira de Iniciação Científica.

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