

Geopolitics of Culture: Power and Consumption in the Contemporary Metropolis

Space is socially constructed. In current approaches of cultural geography, the scholars, Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey, argue from the perspective of historical materialism which recognizes the significance of spatial practices in capitalist production and reproduction. For them, the spatial relationship mediates the dialectic powers between state, capital, institution and the individual. Similarly, the writings of Peter Jackson (who holds a material cultural geography perspective) and Iain Chambers, concentrate on the symbolic consumption of the modern space and the multiple identities in the mobility of urban society. They deal with the relationship between the individuals (and their consciousness) and the material continuity and the discontinuity of modern space.

Chambers' discussion of the complexities of 'reading' Naples is a case in point. Naples is not only a piecemeal city attached to the edge of Southern Europe, but a city in fragments with mixed histories, cultures and identities. The modern skyline shows Naples as a planned and rational city, whereas the pocket of mercantilism, street barter and crime behind the modern scene have come to tell the disorder and struggles of the city. Neapolitan identity is no longer purely Mediterranean nor European. The Japanese come to nourish Naples' commercial and administrative centers. Female immigrants who come from Cabo Verde, Somalia and the Philippines are mostly employed as domestic labour and the West African male immigrants work in agriculture or become street vendors. For Chambers, the changing disposition of urban space and the actual living experience of everyday practices are his emphases.

I propose to investigate the two separated but interrelated themes: first, the space and consumption in urban society; and second, the different ways in which power is constituted in the actual spatial texts.

With space and consumption, I intend to explore the different ways in which space is politically and culturally transformed; where the form is shaped by the visual dimension of space - the 'representation of space' and the 'representational space'. The lobby space of Palace Hotel Beijing is a great example to illustrate this point. Unlike China's many other hotels which lobbies contain merely reception and resting areas for very pragmatic aims,

the lobby space of Palace Hotel (whose architecture has earned a postmodern fame by its disordered windows) has the boutiques of *Louis Vuitton* and *Cartier* playing a significant role. Apparently, these boutiques represent the extreme luxury leisure style and accommodation. Thus, in terms of 'representation of space', one can come to examine the reproduction of social relations within the lobby of Palace Hotel: how does the process of gentrification happen there? what classes of people have been automatically included and excluded by the space? what socio-economic contradiction takes place in between Palace Hotel and the environment outside? From the perspective of 'representational space', the symbolic representation needs to be carefully considered here. Symbolic representation maintains the reproduction of social relations and ensures the dis/continuity of spatial practices within space. Like the space of the hotel lobby with boutiques of high-end goods, like the show rooms of *Louis Vuitton* and *Cartier* with fine decoration, personal customer representatives and heavy security - similar to the antique convertible in the showcase of *Louis Vuitton* - these are representational spaces that overwhelmingly embody complex symbolic meanings. One would ask: what are symbolic meanings constructed and experienced? The meanings are above all about the stores and their goods for sale. The spaces signify the ideal images of an affluent and excess society for Chinese people, no matter if they are included or excluded by the spaces.

I also want to explore the ways in which individuals interpret and negotiate the spatial form of meanings in their everyday practices; these practices are defined, transformed, lived and identified within the urban environment. Similarly, I will attempt to answer how the symbolic meanings that are constantly constituted through the space we are embedded in everyday life and how meaning is made in everyday cultural practices?

In addition, I will investigate the two issues which relate closely to the theme of space and consumption - globalism and identity. The urban space today is incorporated by globalism. McDonald's big M becomes a new landmark in Tiananmen Square and Niketown opens its flagship store in Shanghai's commercial district. Tourists, immigrants, refugees and foreign workers constitute and diversify the city in which they live. Hong Kong and Taiwanese immigrants make Richmond in Vancouver a modern China town where the Chinese characters find their spaces on the signboards of stores. The notorious China Bank's¹ sharp triangle roof has been emulated and rises up in Richmond's Central Plaza. Such trends of globalism refers to the movements of capital, ethnicities, and cultural practices. How do the movements help to change the disposition of urban space? and how

¹ China Bank is a skyscraper located at Central, Hong Kong. its sharp triangle roof has been judged as against Chinese principle of 'Feng Shui' in the landscape of Hong Kong, which implies the fate of 1997 turnover.

are these movements culturally experienced by people? To this end, the identities in these cultural practices of urban consumption also need to be stressed (the often virulent argument of national identities therefore seems to be overstated in this sense). The identities of urban life are inextricably bound with the mixed historical, economic and cultural practices of urban contexts; they are unstable and fragile. I seek to focus on what the negotiation in constructing identities are, and how the multiple identities are expressed by the urban practices.

In the second theme, I want to explore the relationship between power and space in particular. I propose to investigate the ways in which power is inscribed in space as a form of narrative discourse. Power manipulates the stories of spaces - the creation and disconstruction of spaces - and the stories of peoples' lives - the usage of spaces and activities within spaces. Thus, power in this aspect is not only denoted as the Foucaultian power of control, but also as the power in terms of space's material condition, aesthetics (style) and people's appropriation and resistance. Borrowing the example of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles from Fredric Jameson, the Bonaventure violates the conventional rules of a hotel entrance with its marquee and porte cochere; instead, its entrances are "lateral and rather back door affairs"². The visitors have to travel with their baggage walking down one level to find an elevator in which to gain access to the lobby. Although the Bonaventure does attract a considerable number of tourists by its 'no sense of direction thought', the tenants of the shopping balcony earn minimal profit. Shoppers have difficulty locating the appropriate boutiques. The Bonaventure's postmodern spatial logic has powerfully narrated the ways in which tourists' movements and storekeepers struggle for survival in space. According to Jameson, the Bonaventure's outer glass wall appears to be the locus in which power is deployed. The glass skin of the building simply constrains the communication between the Bonaventure and its neighborhood. The people inside the Bonaventure can "achieve a certain aggressivity towards and power on the Other"³ whereas those on the outside only see themselves as distorted images on the Bonaventure's glass. What does the Bonaventure say about the city's uneven development, since the Bonaventure is located near a neighborhood -South Central LA - which contains crime, poverty and racism. Symbolic of the Bonaventure's untransparent glass wall, the wealth, prosper, and the prosperity and beautiful living are unreachable for the South Central residents.

² Fredric Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duck UP, 1991,39.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

In sum, there are two parameters in this examination, the first, the space of consumption, and the second, the spatial discourse of power.

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