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## Making space for topology

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## **Making Space for Topology: A Reply**

*Dialogues in Human Geography*

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Anssi Passi thoughtfully reminds us, as does Stuart Elden in his scholarly historical manner, that topology as a branch of geometry has a long and chequered past within (and beyond) the confines of human geography. Geographers of a certain age, for instance, are more likely to remember the flat surfaces, fixed co-ordinates and measured distances which gave an era of spatial modelling its hallmark certainties. The quantitative 'turn' in the 1960s, or 'revolution' as it was then known, much like the cultural 'turn' of the late 1980s and 1990s, gave a generation of geographers their largely distinctive sense of both space and time. David Harvey's impressive *Explanation in Geography* (1969), as Passi notes in passing, captured that mathematical moment and went on to explore topology as a form of qualitative geometry; as a way of understanding space and time when the numbers no longer quite add up to anything significant.

Topology, of course, in that sense, is nothing new, and we rightly should be careful not to fall foul of modish accounts which pretend otherwise. Just because the discipline of human geography seems to be more prone to intellectual amnesia than many others, often failing to acknowledge its conceptual debts and reinventing itself anew, does not mean that we have never been on this particular journey before. In that respect, each of the responses, in their own way, helps us to understand where we have been more or less all along. But that is not to say that the significance of topological spaces has always been clear to us.

### *Becoming topological?*

Contexts obviously change, as Passi is at pains to point out, and skew or slant the descriptions under which events become known to us. Contexts also shape our experiences of, say, what is near and what is far, what is past and what is present,

even how it is possible for others elsewhere to be more or less present in the here and now of daily life. Stephen Kern's (1983) acclaimed account of how, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sense of the present was thickened temporally, to include tracts of the past and portentions of the future, as well expanded spatially by the shared experience of simultaneity created by the new transportation and communications technologies, provided an insight into the forces that shaped spatial as well as temporal experience for a largely European audience in that period. Experiences, however, do not come with their spatial and temporal implications attached. They require interpretation, and for Kern the topological formed no part of that description. In retrospect, much of what Kern described could have easily fallen under a topological lexicon, but its significance was not drawn. Nowadays, though, what is striking, at least within geography, is that the spur for topological understanding seems to be coming from a variety of directions and standpoints, provoking questions way beyond those posed by Kern.

Alan Latham's observations support such a view. He rightly draws attention to the range of issues and entities - from material objects and non-humans through to the body, for instance - that have been subjected to topological interpretation. From Sarah Whatmore's (2002) wildlife topologies, Karen Bickerstaff and Peter Simmons (2009) technological risk subjectivities through to John Urry's (2004) mobile technologies, and Kevin Hetherington's (2004) analysis of consumption and disposal, to name but a few, topology as a spatial and temporal analytic is engaged to make sense of the twists and turns in the entangled relations under scrutiny. Matt Coleman, too, notes the significance of outline topological thinking for the critique of scale developed by Marston, Jones and Woodward, more especially for the intensive, immanent landscapes that they wish to chart and explore (see also, Belcher et al, 2008). For my

part, it is today's shifting geographies of power relations that capture my interest, many of which seem best grasped through a topological sense of space and time.

On a number of fronts, then, what we appear to be witnessing, within parts of the geography discipline at least, is not just another redefining of territory, of scale or of boundaries, but a willingness to think about spatial and temporal change in a different vein. The use of topological terms is selective, often eclectic, yet something seems to be happening to the way that we think about space and time – as nonlinear, intensive, folded even – that increasingly chimes with our experience of the world. But, for all that, experiences can be misrecognised and, as noted, are open to varying interpretation. How things are is not necessarily the same as our experience of them.

This age-old dilemma is at the heart of the question posed, in more nuanced fashion, by both Coleman and Latham, namely: is it the world today that is becoming more topological or merely our grasp of it? Or, expressed by Elden in a more philosophical vein, is it the object of analysis that is shifting or our way of understanding it? Rousing as such questions are, a commonplace answer nonetheless is one that suggests either, that it is both these things at one and the same time, or that it is neither, simply because the world and our understanding of it have been more or less topological all along. It is just that, as pointed out, this fact may not always have been clear to us.

I could go on, but this is one of life's great seesaw debates. Of more interest, to my mind, is why topology seems to *work better* at grasping the mix of time-spaces embedded in the here and now of much social and material interaction. Why, that is, its half-formed vocabulary within geography seems to promise much, despite, or perhaps because of, the jolt to our comforting topographies that it represents.

## *Promising vocabularies*

Latham recognises the importance of breaking with old spatial vocabularies, changing the way we talk about space and time. The reason for doing so, however, has less to do with the novelty of the break itself, and more to do with the fact that our existing scalar or territorial vocabularies get in the way of our redescrptions. In talking about 'reach' as intensive, not extensive, or 'connections' as composing the spaces of which they are a part, not simply lines drawn on a map, my intention in using familiar words in less familiar ways, was precisely to tempt others to think about power relations in this way, as a better way of understanding power's shifting geographies. There is nothing supplementary about this, but there is a focussed attempt to work with the terms in a more precise way, in the hope that others will be able to see the value of the semantics involved.

What it is *not* is an attempt at semantic closure, an attempt to stipulate which spatial and temporal metaphors are acceptable under a topological rubric (for stipulative arrogance over terms such as scale, territory, place and network, one need look no further than Jessop et al, 2008). The 'stretching' of social relations that Anthony Giddens spoke about in the 1980s was topological in spirit, if not in practice, as is the notion that time may be 'folded' or space 'plaited', but simply to invoke such metaphors is more or less an empty gesture. Such metaphors may be seductive for the promise that they hold out, but their appeal is simply that, unless they can be shown to work for certain purposes and not others (as Richard Rorty, 1989, stressed). A deckchair does not fold as a landscape does, nor does space stretch and twist like a rope. Invocation is not the same as explication.

Geography and the social sciences are littered with failed metaphors, words which, after their initial promise faded, nobody was much interested in using them.

Law and Mol's (2001) attempt to invoke fire and fluidity as topological metaphors, which suggest abrupt and gradual movements respectively, may be colourful, but owe little to the eye-opening possibilities that topology offers. Topology, in its mathematical guise, is interested in relations of connection, relationships of a non-metric kind that remain unchanged in spite of being stretched, twisted or distorted in some fashion. Experimenting with metaphorical redescrptions of spatial and temporal relations within the ambit of this legacy, as Latham encourages, is precisely the type of thing that we should be doing, but not without regard for their exploratory promise, what they open up in terms of understanding, and why, exactly, they are topological and not just, say, a pick n' mix selection of spaces and times or a nice line in enticing metaphors.

Topology is not simply an excuse for drawing together multiplicities of things from here and there and calling the resultant outcome complex or heterogeneous (as Stephen Collier (2009) is prone to do). Rather, topology represents an opportunity for geographers to think again about how it is that events elsewhere seem to be folded or woven into the political fabric of daily life, or about how powerful actors, including non-humans, register their presence, despite their physical absence, or what it means to put sweatshop exploitation beyond reach when distance is not part of the equation. Few of these opportunities are going to lead anywhere though, unless we can spell out *what difference* it makes to grasp them topologically.

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