

**After Critical Geopolitics:
Why Spatial IR Theorizing Needs More Social Theory**

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Abstract:

In this paper, we argue that most attempts to rethink the politics of space in IR still struggle to move out of the conceptual shadow of traditional geopolitics. Most accounts conceptualise space in opposition to the geopolitical container model, yet, they usually modify certain components of this model rather than seeking to transgress it. In response to this critical diagnosis, we suggest IR theory needs a reengagement with the fundamentals of social theory on how spatial terms can be described in relation to human society before investigating more historically specific “claims about the transcendence of the Westphalian System, the emergence of a post-international world, and hence the supersession of the traditional intellectual problematic of the international itself”, in the words of Justin Rosenberg. In order to do that we introduce the writings of two contemporary sociological theorists on the role of space for the theorization of politics: the Actor Network Theory of Bruno Latour and the systemic theory of world society proposed by the late Niklas Luhmann. In social geography, these two bodies of work have been described as offering substantial alternative possibilities to both the “spatial fetishism” of material container space conceptualisations *and* the “spatial exorcism” that insists that space be seen exclusively as discourse, as most contemporary perspectives in IR theory do. We conclude the paper by exploring the possibilities of advanced social theoretical conceptualisations of space for IR theory by expounding and comparing the consequences of applying actor-network and systemic perspectives to the concept of national territory and the notion of failed states in IR theory.

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1. Introduction

In 1910, Norman Angel suggested that nationality “as a limiting force is breaking down before cosmopolitanism” (quoting international lawyer, Mr. T. Baty in Angell 1910: 252). History soon proved Angell wrong and his liberal belief in a more harmonious world governed by a common interest – reflected in the title *The Great Illusion* – was turned against himself (in fact this was done even prior to WW1Mahan 1912). Rather than a surge in cosmopolitan ideas Europe witnessed a backlash in the form of a nationalist, conservative, and aggressive reaction to the liberal world order of the late 19th and early 20th century, which was intellectually tied up with the self-proclaimed science of geopolitics. This might have been, in part, a response to the hegemonic dominance of liberalism and the way in which it ignored difference.¹ And despite the fashionable dismissing of spatial orders of difference in most social science literature of the late 20th century, the world appears to be facing a similar situation in the sense that a liberal world order is facing yet more responses expressed in spatial forms of difference. Let the most recent example be the forcible eviction of Roma from French territory (despite the probable legal futility of this measure), which besides showing a notion of spatial homogeneity that was thought to have been overcome, perhaps also displays a continuing discomfort with rhizomatic expressions of identity. Another example might be the disputes over maritime borders in the Arctic region or in the East China Sea. This possible return of spatial-exclusivist semantics emphasises the need for International Relations (IR) theory to come to terms with spatial concepts in a way that avoid the dangers of classical geopolitics.

Now, the rise of nationalism is not a novel phenomenon but has taken place over more than a decade, yet this only exacerbates the need for IR to come to terms with the relationship between space and politics. And true, there have been several attempts to bring space – or spatial issues – on to the agenda in IR; most notably by John Ruggie (Ruggie 1993), Rob Walker (Walker 1993), and the emerging field of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail 1996; Dodds 2001). But despite attempts to raise the spatial issue, we argue in this paper that IR theory still struggles with coming to terms with geography. And this critique is also valid for the constructivist and poststructuralist challenges that has emerged since the 1980s. In the following we argue that the spatial contenders in IR theory has yet to break with the spatial legacy of geopolitics in the effort to re-articulate the relationship between space and politics. And, in sequence, we introduce Bruno Latour and Niklas Luhmann to provide alternative

¹ Such responses can be seen, for example, in the Nazi-inspired phase of Carl Schmitt’s writing (Schmitt et al. 1976), which in turn have their intellectual antecedents in the geopolitical works of people like Kjellen (Holdar 1992; Tunander 2001), and Friedrich List’s (1909) foundation of a nationalist political economy.

theoretical approaches to this problematique. We conclude the paper with a dialogue between Laour, Luhmann, and how their ideas affect the discussion of space in IR.

2. The Dilemma of Spatial Concepts in IR

Following the second world war, geography disappeared very much from the IR agenda. While the geopolitical heritage probably played its part in an attempt to distance the discipline from the nazi ideology. More generally, though, it is fair to say that since the trend towards becoming an objectivist social science, IR theory has had an uneasy relationship with spatial concepts in general and towards the older, but intellectually marginal and morally dubious current of geopolitics in particular.² Yet, despite the attempts to despatialise the discipline, it could be argued that assumptions about spatial relations in IR have never really moved out of geopolitics' shadow. Realist theories still incorporated a basically geopolitical view of the importance of space as "the most stable factor" (Morgenthau 1993: 124, cf. Waltz 1979: 131) contributing to a nation's power, and classical geopolitics with its insistence on physical space as the most relevant determining factor of global political processes has enjoyed some kind of a renaissance as popular science while being mostly rejected as a reactionary ideology of military and foreign policy elites in academic IR circles (Mamadouh 1999: 120).

But also more recent approaches have essentially based their view of the role of space in IR theory on an inversion of classical geopolitical imaginations of space. Critical geopolitics, for example, conceive the space of politics as a form of "power/knowledge" used by political elites to maintain or shift power structures instead of being a material driving force of political life (Ó Tuathail 1996: 59), but essentially maintain the semantics of space as constituting socially exclusive 'containers' while diverging in their ontological and ethical appraisal of those semantics. Theories of deterritorialization or 'globalization', on the other hand, often dismissed the concept of space entirely by first equating it with classical notions of state territoriality and then proclaiming its coming to an end. Political power would no longer require spatial forms, but might be set to return to a postmodern variant of depending on interpersonal loyalties (Ruggie 1993: 145-149). While the classical geopolitical semantics of the Westphalian state only knew a sharp segmentation of territorial states, the advocates of the deterritorialization hypothesis either proclaimed the end of politics and therefore the end of space, or more commonly, the end of space and therefore the end of politics. Effectively, they thus iterated the subcomplex narration of the "container model", insisting on the identity of politics, state and territory while proclaiming the death of all three (cf. Schroer 2006: 46).

² With the notable exception of Raymond Aron (1966) who presents a detailed discussion of the role of space in IR.

Logically, proclaiming the dawn of a new epoch with a new non-spatial model of politics required accepting to some degree the previous validity of that container model.

We therefore argue that neither of the currently prevailing perspectives on political spatiality have moved out of the conceptual shadow of classical geopolitics. Rather, they arrived at their conceptualization of space by modifying certain components of the geopolitical container model – intent on replacing it, but actually carrying its description of the political world with them. Consequentially, what is needed to deal with the challenge of space to IR theory is, we suggest, a reengagement with the fundamentals of social theory on how spatial terms can be described in relation to human society on a much more substantial level than has been done hitherto in the prevailing discussions on space in the disciplines. This is particularly pressing if we want to investigate more historically specific “claims about the transcendence of the Westphalian System, the emergence of a post-international world, and hence the supersession of the traditional intellectual problematic of the international itself” (Rosenberg 2000: 46), which is after all a subset of the topical scope of social theory.

In an effort to pick up this challenge, we seek to reconstruct the arguments made by two contemporary and very influential sociological theories on the role of space for the theorization of politics: namely the actor-network theory associated with Bruno Latour (1993) and the systemic theory of world society proposed by the late Niklas Luhmann (1997). In social geography, these two bodies of work have been described as offering substantial alternative possibilities to both the “spatial fetishism” of material container space conceptualisations – like those put forward by classical geopolitics – *and* the “spatial exorcism” that insists that space be seen exclusively as discourse, as most contemporary perspectives in IR theory do (Koch 2005: 5). We then further explore the possibilities of advanced social theoretical conceptualisations of space for IR theory by expounding and comparing the consequences of applying actor-network and systemic perspectives to common topics of IR theory. After all, its main schools carry with them their own spatial imagery that is often noted, but seldom explored thoroughly: Realism with its insistence on sharply segmented territorial units and their differentiation into great and minor powers, social constructivism with its distinction of Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian worlds (Wendt 1999), world systems theory with its marking of core and periphery, or human rights-oriented liberal theories which draw lines “between liberal states and ‘states of concern’”³ (Bonacker 2007: 27) – all presuppose a certain spatial order which is rarely posited as such in a explicit manner, yet are an integral part of how such theories affect our visual, cartographic

³ Or “outlaw states”, as John Rawls (1999: 5) called them in his theorization of liberal conceptions of international law.

understanding of global politics. Buzan and Wæver (2003: 70) disavow both strict geographic determinism and a purely textual approach while insisting on the relevance of both through a “political framework” for the interpretation of space – the formulation of which, however, remains a somewhat enigmatic undertaking.

3. Nature, Society, Space and Theory

The physical or corporal character of political power has been a controversial topic of various disciplines of social science since the devolution of sovereignty “from the unitary, physical body of the monarch to the fragmented, dispersed body of the multitude”, generally seen as the principal characteristic of modern polities (cf. Kalyvas 2009: 88). However, in no theoretical strand has the distinction between various positions been so clear cut as in political geography or geopolitical theory. At one extreme, there is the view proposed by classical geopolitics, which holds that political geography must be “built upon and subsequent to physical geography” (Mackinder 1942: 153) – that power relations should be seen as an outcome of the physical location and physical agency of humans and their organizations. This causal chain echoes most prominently in neorealist theories’ appraisal of territory as a component of power and of the relative effects of land and sea power on interstate relations (cf. Levy/Thompson 2010: 8). But contemporary theories of globalization often share a similar epistemic assumption – though applying it with a different empirical and normative focus – in “posing the globalisation of politics as a matter of imposed necessity rather than a social construct which is open to critique” (Chandler 2009: 536). In any case, the perspective on political structures gained by accepting such proposals is one of social reality shaped by physical reality.

This idea has massively lost credibility in academic IR at least since critical geopolitics became the near-dominant perspective on spatial concepts – if measured by the proportion of contributions to relevant journals – within the discipline (Redepenning 2007: 91), concurrent with the wider intellectual current of the linguistic turn and social constructivism. Understanding itself as a both epistemologically and ethically superior alternative to classical representations of space in geopolitics and realist IR theory, critical geopolitics proposes to enable an emancipatory view on political spatiality by uncovering the repressive power relations contained in seemingly objective geographical descriptions of reality through a deconstructivist re-reading (Ó Tuathail 2000: 393). Instead of investigating the supposedly objective effects of physical reality on political agency, the contingency of spatial imagery associated with the interests of geopolitical elites becomes the focus. In

several ways, critical geopolitics appears as an exact counterpart to its antecedent: Instead of being part of physical reality, space is taken as an exclusively textual phenomenon with no existence or pre-determined relevance outside of geopolitical texts. And instead of being a constraining factor on the agency of political actors, as in classical geopolitics, it becomes an expression of the agency of strategic elites that are empowered to conceive geopolitical representations of space. Classical geopolitics serves to inform rational government policy in an imperfect world, while critical geopolitics see themselves as part of a wider social movement with emancipatory aims (cf. Kelly 2006). The two strands of geopolitical theory obviously appeal to rather different audiences in the political spectrum as well as in academia. Still, some surprising parallels make them more similar in some important aspects than they first appear. Both theories are intimately bound up in the production and re-production of the nexus of geographical knowledge and power that they seek to interpret. In classical geopolitics, this nexus takes the form of concrete knowledge of the physical world, objectively beholden by an epistemically privileged Cartesian observer who then turns into a dispassionate advisor to the powerful (cf. Redepenning 2006: 84). However, for all its emphasis on the contingency of geopolitical imaginations, critical geopolitics also contains elements of such a privileged observing position which is so out of line with contemporary epistemological thought – namely, that it can disclose the hidden interests inherent in geopolitical representations through an apparently unobstructed view on social power relations that must be unavailable to the uninitiated for the geopolitical imagery to function. Whereas classical geopolitics reifies physical space and leaves power relations as contingent and dependent on human decision-making (e.g. Mackinder 1996: 130f), critical geopolitics relies on the objectified existence of geopolitical elites without exploring the social processes that lead to their functioning or empirically demonstrating their assumed relevance. This omission has been aptly described as a “societal blind spot” (Müller/Reuber 2008: 463). In their specific ways, both fail to overcome the divide between incompatible subjectivist and objectivist assumptions – a dilemma that has been tackled by several classical sociological writers and should not be considered arcane (cf. Connell 2006: 245). And besides this epistemological problem, the unnecessary privilege accorded to ‘geopolitical elites’ tends to naturalize the position of power of authors of spatial semantics of difference.

Finally, what both strands fail to recognize is that in an operative sense, the separation of purely physical or natural versus purely social or textual space – while deeply embedded in geopolitical thought as well as in IR theory – is dubious in itself. Both classical and critical geopolitics treat ‘their’ respective classes of phenomena as if they somehow existed without

the other in an isolated material or textual continuum. From a process-oriented view, however, it becomes clear that this isolation is a consequence of pre-theoretical preferences that should be questioned if the concept of space is to be given a more fruitful role in IR research: Before physical realities can be recognized as such by the classical geopolitician, they must be transformed into readable ‘text’ – e.g. a map or a globe – through a process which in turn hinges on numerous social preconditions itself (Kaspersen/Strandsbjerg 2009: 239). On the other hand, the textual aspect of political space also relies on a supporting material infrastructure, from the supply of paper and energy – in itself a prominent subject of geopolitical interpretations (Ciută 2010: 138) – to the fiberoptic cables that transport electronic messages through supposedly deterritorialized cyberspace. From this point of view, material and textual space appear less as distinct concepts that merit investigation by separate theoretical traditions, but more as the opposite – but intertwined – faces of a Moebius band (Rosière 2008: 9). Those two faces could symbolize the many binarisms that spatial approaches to IR theory must consider, and perhaps transcend: the textual and the physical, the natural and the social, agency and structure, dynamic and permanency – all while avoiding to become unspecific or imprecise. Phil Kelly (2006: 50) makes a somewhat similar argument regarding the potential complementarity of classical and critical approaches that he argues should be combined to generate a more inclusive approach towards the study of political spatiality. In the light of the many incompatibilities and ideological trappings of both strands, however, we hold that a social theoretical reexamination of the definitions of space as well as its relation to the wider scope of IR topics is in order before such an innovation could be meaningfully considered.

4. Latourian Space and IR Theory

The science studies of Bruno Latour represents one of the most radical departures from the viewpoint that space is something natural and given. Countering the common belief that time and space is a frame for all social practice, Latour emphasises how “space is something generated *inside* the observatory” (Latour, 1987: 229). The belief that space and time exist independently as a frame of reference *inside* which events occur “makes it impossible to understand how different spaces and different times may be produced *inside the networks* built to mobilise, cumulate and recombine the world.” (Latour, 1987: 228). While this requires further explanation, the crucial message carried forward with this statement is that we cannot understand the relationship between space and society by positing space as a natural frame inside which social practice exists. Not only does his sociology of knowledge

undermine a notion of a given physical geography *as being relevant for understanding society*, it also suggests that many of the contributions to human geography and, what could be labelled, social space studies reinforce the subject/object distinction as discussed above. This is so because, in Latour's sociology, space is not only a social construction, it is also a construction of nature. In the following, we will present a brief outline of Latour's ideas and their implications for the conception of space within IR. This leads to the final section where a dialogue between IR, Latour and Luhmann will show how this is useful.

The most radical claim in Latour's sociology is probably his refusal to accept an ontological division between subjects and objects; between society and nature; between minds and their environment. His starting point, as it is theorised in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993), is to go against the great divides which have been constitutive of so-called modern politics and knowledge. This, he argues, rests on a fundamental distinction between God and society, and between nature and the mind (Latour 1999: chap1).⁴ And, logically, Latour then argues that rather than taking these divisions as a starting point for academic enquiries we should trace how these divisions were established and came to be taken for granted. He traces the flaws of modern epistemology to the Cartesian division between the mind as the seat of reason, and reality as an external reality. It is this division between an inner subjectivity and an external physical world that has nurtured the notion that humans and nature constitute two different worlds where two different sciences are required; one for society (humans) and one for nature.

The notion of two sciences is nowhere as obvious as with geography's division into human and natural geography separating the study of spatiality into a human and a natural one. While there might be historical pragmatic reasons for this, Latour encourages us to abandon a search for 'different ontologies' or ontological divisions. There are no different worlds needing different sciences. The only division that Latour admits is that between humans and non-humans but the key is not to keep them analytically separate but rather to investigate how they interact, and how they both possess causality in the sense that they affect each other. In other words, Latour posits 'societies' as 'collectives of *humans* and *nonhumans*' (Latour 1999: 174-215). By the phrase 'objects have agency too' Latour (2005: 63-86) argues that objects and technology, for example, alter the motivation and the goals of 'actors' when they enter into a relationship. Using the example of the dispute concerning gun control in the United States, he argues that neither the statement *guns kill people* nor the

⁴ These arguments are, of course, not unique to Latour but resonate with a wider inspiration from poststructuralist writings, and not least pragmatism as it has been formulated by Dewey and Rorty (for example, Rorty 1979).

counter *guns don't kill people, people kill people* provides the correct answer (Latour 1999: 176-177). The former lets technology decide and the later reifies the agency of 'people'. Instead the argument is that when the human and the gun enter into a relation they are both transformed. In a sense it is a trivial point, but the wider implication is that objects ought to be included in what is considered social and, furthermore, that society cannot be explained without giving proper agency to all the techniques and 'objects' which are essential for its constitution.

How does this translate into the concern with space in IR? First, it has consequences for the assessment of how space has been interrogated within the discipline in poststructuralist, constructivist and globalist accounts. And second, it has implications for how the relationship between nature and society, and between space and territory can be articulated. Regarding the former, when we look at the emerging spatial concerns within IR, there is a predominant tendency to emphasise the social construction of meaning and political significance of space. This is the case with social constructivism, like Ruggie and Wendt, as well as with the poststructuralist challengers to the discipline. However, meaning-creation and the ascription of significance require an object that can be interpreted or ascribed meaning to. In other words, we argue that that these interventions assume space as a united category, or phenomenon, prior to the analysis. And because we want to avoid the pitfalls of traditional geopolitics, we will avoid ascribing causality to space and, therefore, we maintain the focus on how people/society affect space and not the other way around. Hence, space already exists as an object and analysts should only be concerned with how this space is given meaning and significance in society. And this is, in fact, to maintain the subject/object divide as foundational for the conceptualisation of space.

And this is problematic for at least two reasons. First, space is maintained as a container of society. We live in physical space but we are only concerned with how this is interpreted. This is in a way to hand the mantle back to the realists and say: you were right, there is an objective reality but we are not concerned with it. On the contrary, we only look at how this is interpreted. This would imply that if we, as social scientists, do not have to concern ourselves with the physical nature, or materiality in common IR parlance, we can simply look at how meaning structures and discourse determines how we perceive space. Second, and in sequence, space becomes a very fluid category. If rethinking space is 'only' a question of social perceptions of a given reality, these perceptions can always be changed, and there is no end to the possibilities of thinking space in political terms. Reminding ourselves of the opening sections of this paper, this is to say that political space in IR has moved from

being physically, or materially, determined to being socially (in a human sense) determined without really challenging our conception of what space is and how it relates to politics, territory and all the other spatial fundamentals of IR. What if space affects politics, territory, globalisation etc? How do we articulate this so the analysis of space is not reduced to the social processes of meaning creation that space was originally going to tell us something about?

The answer from a Latourian perspective would be to avoid the subject/object distinction; to avoid simply talking in terms of language or nature but to include both in the analysis of space. Hence, rather than thinking space as a container for society we should think space as a relation to the environment – for lack of a better term – where both the materiality of space (non human element) and the sociality (the human element) bears upon what is eventually considered space. That is, rather than remaining within a largely text-based analysis, which seeks openings through deconstruction, the Latourian perspective leads us to an understanding that reclaims a notion of reality without losing sight of the mundane fact that this is, of course, a construction. This leads to an analysis of space where there is more focus on all the different technologies of calculation, technology, cartography, surveying, navigation and so on that provides us with *a reality of space* (Strandsbjerg 2010/forthcoming) (Thrift 2000); on all the things that relates what is commonly considered nature with what is considered society. In this sense space can be ascribed analytical causality, or conditioning power, without being over-determined by either ‘society’ or ‘nature’.

In sum, Latour forces us to think space not as a given entity but as something that is constructed – not only as a human construction – but exactly in the encounter between *humans* and *non-humans* (technologies, rocks, capes, mountains etc etc). In sequence, space is not simply space. Not because geographical space is understood differently in different societies but because there is not such a thing as physical space as unified category. This also implies that space is historicised. The establishment of space as a phenomenon that can be talked about, measured and weighed has a particular history; and while the relationship between humans and their environment is a universal one, the particular articulation of this relationship as one of space is not a universal but a particular history. That is to say that in order for us to talk about space as a singular category is has to be assembled as such through social practices that tie people to their environment in a particular manner. This is not the place to investigate this particular history (though, see Pickles 2004; Latour 1987; Elden 2005; and Strandsbjerg 2010/forthcoming) but the theoretical point to bear in mind is that to

determine spatial change proper, we would then have to investigate the practices and networks within which space is produced.

5. Luhmannian Space and IR Theory

In contrast to Bruno Latour, the late sociological theorist Niklas Luhmann did not bother to create a detailed account of spatial concepts for his social theory, even going so far as to proclaim that he was not very interested in them and that he had always had “difficulties with spatial orders” (Luhmann 2009: 98). However, the scope and success of this theory and especially the perspectives on spatial aspects of its concepts that have been developed in social geography (e.g. Lippuner 2005) and their beginning application in research on spatial phenomena in IR (Esmark 2004, Huhnholz 2010, Kessler/Helmig 2007) should merit an appraisal of its performance in modifying our understanding of space in IR.

Luhmann’s systemic theory of society is a complex affair of interlocking concepts that defies easy or often even definitive understanding. One possible starting point for exploring the notion of political spatiality inherent in his theory is the concept of communication. For Luhmann, meaning-processing systems produce and re-produce themselves by generating a boundary (in the non-spatial sense) between themselves and the environment in order to reduce the virtually infinite and irreducible complexity of the world in its entirety. In case of social systems, this boundary is defined by the character of the processing of meaning within the system by means of communication by language, whereas outside the system it may take a host of other forms (thoughts, neurological processes) that might be translated into language, but thereby lose their character and become yet another communication (cf. Luhmann 1984: 247). Instead of focusing on the interaction of humans with other humans or on their interaction with objects, according to most common interpretations, Luhmann thus radically excludes both the material world and human beings as psychological entities from his analysis. Rather, the study of society – and thus also of global politics – becomes the redescription of communications which are observed by other communications (and therefore a self-referential process within society itself), a technique that is termed “second-order observation” in systemic theory (Luhmann 2005: 221). It relies heavily on the observation of the *distinctions* made in communication – be it oral, written or electronic – of which three are fundamental to its understanding and subsequent reproduction (Luhmann 1984: 123f): the *factual* distinction (this/something else), the *temporal* distinction (past/future) and the *social* distinction (ego/alter), which refers to the incongruity of the perspectives at two ends of the

same communication which would have been made absolute in older sender/receiver models of communication.

The Luhmannian conception of human – or rather, non-human – society as it becomes clearer at this point has significant consequences for possible definitions of the concept of space. By denying the ‘easy’ definition of space as an external arena in which human beings act, space must become – if it is to be a meaningful category at all – an integral part of communication, which is often grouped among notionally non-spatial concepts in social theory. Certainly, every communication certainly also requires a physical environment external to the Luhmannian conception of society – such as air, vocal chords or a modem. But the effect of such externalities within the social universe of communication depends on the distinctions made by the observer communicating on physical geography, which is therefore not external to, but another distinction within communication (cf. Stichweh 2000: 192). Importantly, it circumvents the dilemma of having to decide on its physical/natural or social/textual character at a general level. Instead of forcing an ontological distinction on the observer, the second-order observer himself will have to observe the manner in which this distinction is made in any occurring communications. Societal space for systemic theory is not a reality generated by its own rules, but rather a set of distinctions drawn by other observers, the question is not what space ‘is’ in a material sense, but rather how it operates in social forms and processes. Kessler and Helmig (2007: 579) see this as a parallel to Critical Geopolitics in that the ontology of space is left open to be defined by social forces – which is certainly true and, considering the constructivist epistemological background of both perspectives, not surprising. However, in contrast to the one-sided openness of Critical Geopolitics’ definition, there is an important difference in that systemic theory also leaves the character of the relevant observer open to investigation, whereas in the former the relevant observer is already defined as territorially oriented geopolitical elites which are empowered somewhere outside of the theory’s scope (cf. Chapter 3).

One could go even further and maintain that systemic theory leaves plenty of room for the operation of *both* classical and critical geopolitical concepts – though not as scientific truths, but as different modes of political communication. It allows for the existence of physical-geographic and textual-geographic scripts of political spaces – the difference being that the former locate causality outside of the communication’s context, whereas the latter describe it as evolving from within the social world. The textual space of political communication would then be seen in Luhmannian terminology as referring to the self-reference of politics – describing the world as the result of political processes, ideologies,

conflicts, and making it accessible to the demands of such processes, generating internal complexity, reflexivity and contingency within the political system (cf. Baraldi et al 1997: 165). On the other hand, physical spatial concepts such as those used within classical geopolitics – but also within a host of other forms of spatial political communication, such as environmentalist or energy security discourses, which rely on the physical reality of the truths that they produce – allow political communication to introduce demands as coming from a virtual outside, presenting them as undeniable fact in terms hetero-reference, generating external complexity and thereby reducing the contingency within the political system (cf. Luhmann 2009a: 10). Obviously, this view suggests a certain complementarity of the two – traditionally opposing – notions of political space in terms of their function in the process of the reduction of environmental complexity. Even though their operative performance as differently coded communications could still be plausibly described as antagonistic, this reformulated antagonism seems to do away with a lot of the morally coded preference for one over the other typically found in discussions on geopolitical notions in IR. That also implies that the traditional options of treating space either as a dependent or an independent variable in IR would cease to exist – space would either be underdetermined or overdetermining, creating ascriptions of causality that would themselves be political in nature, as they directly imply relations of power that are generated within the political system.

This still leaves open the question of *how* spatial forms actually function within social communication. While a full appraisal of this question cannot be undertaken here – so far, Markus Schroer (2006: 132-160) comes closest to such an attempt – a generalized understanding is important for relating the spatial concepts derived from systemic theory to IR theory. Spatial communication – be it of the physical or of the textual variety – is typically based on the distinction between *location* and *object*. This is the meta-distinction into which secondary distinctions – such as the distinction of physical and textual space, the ascription of causality on actors or further distinctions on the actual spatial content and meaning of a form – can be inserted (cf. Nassehi 2003: 220f). However, whereas most grand social theories posit space as a framework external to social action or communication and therefore as independent of considerations of social structure *or* as a purely textual account merely reflective of the social world, again, systemic theory paints a more complex picture. Continued evolution of social systems – and the co-evolution with means of communication such as writing, computers etc. – continually make the patterns according to which communications can interconnect more complex and generally more varied (Luhmann 1984: 576f). Because spatial distinctions can be made at any level in the overall network of interconnecting

communications, they can play a role at basically any point in the scale of micro- and macro-structures. According to Luhmann's seminal work, the most fundamental distinctions within *modern* society at the current degree of evolving complexity are those between different function systems such as the economic, political, scientific, aesthetic, legal etc. systems – each of which operate according to their own, internally generated codes. This generates a model in which spatial differentiations as a general rule not achieve social relevance by themselves – as in socio-territorial descriptions such as the neorealist model of nation states with relatively limited interdependence (Waltz 1979) – but rather through their subordination to *functional* codes (cf. Luhmann 1997: 166f).

This means that rather than having political forms embedded in spatial forms, these will more likely be embedded themselves within politically pre-coded communications – even though the former possibility is by no means excluded. Rather than being a ‘container’ for whole social entities, the functional relevance of space within the politics of modern society lies in its crucial role for the “symbolic generalization” of power: that is, the continuous process through which political decisions are communicated in abstract and general terms – without recurring to the personal attributes or social status of concrete persons, as is generally the case in liberal political orders (cf. Luhmann 1988: 67f): Rather than depending on the social status of an individual, political power is described as a certain decision-making competence invested in a certain office (generally also defined in spatial parameters) – and any “confusion between the office and the person would be seen as [...] corruption” (Baraldi et al 1997: 136). Symbolic generalization is a central prerequisite for the reduction of complexity under the condition of functional differentiation – whereas traditional societies were generally able to define a relatively stable set of role combinations (with parameters such as man/woman, farmer/city dweller, nobleman/commoner etc.), the possible variety of such combinations under modern conditions is near infinite in addition to being extremely fluid – hardly a basis for making collectively binding decisions (Kleinschmidt 2008: 80f). Rather than addressing certain groups by making concrete decisions for them in their place, politics now takes the form of influencing the basis of the decision-making of others by imposing generalized rules which are in turn based on power relations that are expressed in spatial terms. And from the Luhmannian point of view, IR theoretical assumptions on the spatial distribution of power are actually first order observations of such spatial organizations of power – using a mode of theorizing (‘reflection theory’) which adopts the central distinctions and terminology of the observed system as already validated assumptions about social reality. In doing this, they perform (at least in their classical forms) a direct attribution

of causality and thereby a normative judgment within the global political system (cf. Kieserling 2004: 60f). What systemic theory might therefore demand from IR theory is a re-description of its geographical world view as semantics that fulfil a certain function for the reduction of social complexity within a political and social universe that is too complex for one unitary concept of critical or classical geopolitics. What it could provide in return – along with a whole lot of new conceptual complexity – is a basic idea of how to organize the complex and polylogical new descriptions that such an undertaking would generate while still leaving room for established perspectives, albeit in a strongly modified theoretical context.

6. The Space of Social Theory and the Space of IR: A Dialogue

Both Latour and Luhmann provide concepts that have a potential for reorganizing certain aspects of the geography of IR. Both also carry along assumptions that may appear problematic both because of their own epistemic specificity and in terms of the engagement with novel ways of thought that IR theorists might find necessary to actually make them a productive tool in their own toolbox. Yet, we have only briefly sketched central aspects of two large bodies of social theory and they are not, on their own merits, easily compatible. In this section, therefore, we put both strands of social theory in a dialogue with each other and through this dialogue we will expound how they can help develop IR theory in terms of its conception of the relationship between space and politics – especially as relating to the problematic exposed in the introduction: the spatiality of the liberal world order, the illiberal challenges to that order and its possible transcendence.

The two theories each provide possibilities for overcoming the dichotomy of physical and social spaces, however, they do this in very specific ways. As described above, Luhmann's systemic notion of society as communication eliminates and maintains the distinction at the same time by identifying them as semantics relating to the opposition of self-reference and hetero-reference. On the other hand, Latour's actor-network theory transcends the distinction by integrating both human and non-human entities into a chain of actors that create a world which is equally natural and social, and the two categories becoming basically meaningless – or rather, merged into each other, as the non-human actors change the way that human actors perceive and construct the world and vice versa (cf. Koch 2005: 8). To put it differently, the geopolitical agent in Luhmann's case becomes a system of communications that contain both self-referential and hetero-referential descriptions of political reality in order to generate collectively binding decisions and thereby perpetuating its autological mode of operation, whereas in Latour's case, the agent is expanded into a network of interlocking

persons, practices, and technologies. The two perspectives obviously suggest a very different view of how spatial political distinctions and differences are produced and reproduced within global politics: within the Luhmannian concept there is no place for agency, which remains as a mere internal construction of the system to attribute causality within the flow of communication, thereby generating addresses for further communication to make the reproduction of the system possible (cf. Luhmann 1997: 336). This means, for example, that the Westphalian territorial political order is not thought of as a result of practices – e.g. technological advances in cartography and military technology – but rather as one possible (but contingent) result of the logic of functional differentiation, which is itself the consequence of the tendency of social systems to generate increasing complexity which then require new modes of reduction. In the case of territory, it is simply one mode of generating collectivity in order to enable the political system to produce political decisions as older forms of collectively binding decision-making – such as the church or nobility – lose plausibility in a new systemic environment that is defined by functional instead of divine or hierarchical logic (cf. Esmark 2004: 129).

The semantics that explain such differentiations, though, must not necessarily conform to functional differentiation – they can very well use simpler modes of distinction, such as that of nationalism which would identify a certain space with a certain group of people. While this self-description harkens back to more group- and status-oriented structures of social differentiation, within the context of functional differentiation, it fulfils the function of reducing complexity by specifying addresses of communication while at the same time providing a backdrop for the legitimisation of such a reduction of complexity – by naturalizing (or rather: externalising) a difference made within the system (cf. Kastner 2007: 85). The inherent risk of such atavistic semantics would be that semantics themselves have structural properties in terms of organizing expectations and directing the flow of communications – and therefore can generate ‘real’ systemic effects especially if the process of reducing external complexity is not pre-structured by established structures, mechanisms or routines in a new situation which is not covered by current semantics (cf. Stäheli 1998). Obvious examples for our case would be the presence of groups with different modes of representing their spatial identity (for whom the nationalist semantics of space can only generate exclusionary semantics because of its strict coupling of spatial and personal collectivity), or if spaces that were previously defined as outside of the domain of sovereignty (such as some oceanic areas under the UNCLOS III regime) now apparently have to be

described in terms of the strict inside/outside semantics of national territory with the accompanying entitlements (cf. Burgess 2003).

Thus, in Luhmann's theory, the territorial order of modern politics appears as both contingent – as one potential assemblage of political spatiality in an order of social differentiation that might support an unknown number of other possibilities – but also as determined to a certain degree by the necessities of functional systems that require, among other things, a set of pre-stabilized political collectivities to be addressed (cf. Kleinschmidt 2008). Territorial political orders in the context of liberalism, however, can be described as being under the constant threat of operationally succumbing to undercomplex semantics which, while fulfilling certain functions under the 'normal' operating conditions of global politics, are not necessarily open to deal with changes or occurrences that take place outside of their established vocabulary, in this case the territorial semantics of the nation state.

In the case of Latour, the idea of modern politics arise as a settlement that solves a tension between identity and difference. The modern settlement of nature and society as two different realms has allowed us to talk about the world as if it was a given united entity providing a natural stage for politics between differentiated units. This, in turn, has allowed disagreement on 'culture' but not on nature. But, what if, nature is not a given, and the production of space is no neutral cartographic enterprise? Rather than pointing to a conflict between the state and alternative modes of presenting geopolitical discourses, this points to different spatial cultures (for lack of a better term) which would make it difficult to agree on a spatial basis for the distribution of sovereignty. Is it possible, following Latour, to disturb the single uniform notion of nature and still have a notion of equal political communities in a unified natural world? In other words, can we maintain a formal notion of equality between polities if we move to a geopolitics which is not only about control over space but also, and more importantly, controlling the form, or reality, of space?

What both theories have in common, however, is that they do not – in contrast to most current IR conceptions – equate space with territory, but make room for a more nuanced understanding of the multiple forms that political boundaries can take. In neither theory is the notion of political spatiality tied to a specific instance of spatial order, such as the current liberal-Westphalian assemblage. When we detach territory from space we see that the question of how space is established as a unitary category plays a very significant role for the function it can play for the constitution of IR. And any argument concerning fundamental change of the international relations should take the production of space (not necessarily in its Lefebvrian version (Lefebvre 1991)) much more seriously than has been done so far. And

while Latour's division between humans and non-humans is an ontological claim, Latour rightly suggests that the calls for theoretical change or innovation should not be carried out in ontological terms. That is, we should abstain from claiming a new theoretical approach based on 'a new ontology' a 'non-statist ontology' or similar claims. It does not make sense that because we might now, possibly, have moved into an era of globalisation where the state is less of a prominent actor in international relations vis-à-vis international organisations, multi national corporations and other private actors that evokes non-territorial spatial practices, we should adopt a new ontology of space.

The suggestion to abandon discussion about ontology and simplified spatial imaginaries also contain the potential to enhance the understanding for possible reactionary backlashes against liberal forms of political world ordering. Instead of ascribing them simply to either sinister political elites that are described with no connection to wider social theory or to cynical physical-geographic 'necessities', but rather to the uncertainty of how given modes of social existence can deal with the complexity and contingency of new and unforeseen situations. They therefore might also be helpful with overcoming the normative dilemma that comes with more traditional accounts of political spatiality – namely, having to decide between the affirmative accounts of contemporary politics that largely denied human agency associated with classical geopolitics, or radical criticisms of the same that paradoxically did not provide an epistemological alternative. If an injection of more social theory into spatial conceptions of IR theories can help to achieve this, it might well be worth the effort (and the conceptual complexity).

7. References:

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