THE ROLE OF PLACE IN THE MARGINS OF SPACE

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Introduction

In this paper we examine the continuing importance of the concept of 'place', the revival of interest in its fortunes, and extend the analysis to what at first appear to be 'empty spaces'; areas that once appeared at the geographical 'margin', but which have assumed increased importance in the era of globalization. After reviewing the recent literature on 'place' the chapter takes as a case study the Mexican Caribbean coast, and explores the way in which a sense of place is being actively confirmed within the discourses surrounding the rapid urbanization of this coast. In the Conclusion we suggest some of the ways in which the concept might be further developed, indicating several routes into 'place confirmation' as a central idea, and its conceptual potential for environmental sociology.

Before reviewing the extensive recent literature on place it is worth reflecting on why the conceptualization of place played such a modest a role in the geographical canon until relatively recently. For such a key idea place had not been well served by most texts before the 1990s. Subsequently it has provided a touchstone for some lively debate and has begun to attract dissenting voices – always evidence of vigour. The earlier limited attention given to place is illustrated by Cloke, Philo and Sandler (1991) in *Approaching Human Geography,* which has sections on Marxism, and Giddens' structuration theory but nothing on 'place'. Similarly Holt-Jensen (1980) in a student's guide to the discipline devotes only two pages to a discussion of place, towards the end of the book. Tim Unwin's *The Place of Geography,* published in 1992 provides an exhaustive study of the place of geography, but nothing on 'place' itself. Clearly, the publication of Yi-Fu Tuan's influential work *Space and place: the perspective of experience* in 1977, which served to highlight the centrality of place, did little to energise debates in the 1990s. Yi-Fu Tuan had argued that place was a "portion of geographical space occupied by a person or thing" and a "centre of felt value", a repository of meaning and an object of intentionality (1977, 23). This distinction underlined earlier tensions between a largely positivist tradition of spatial

science, and a more hermeneutic tradition. Not until the revival of the concept of place in the last decade has the humanistic and hermeneutic tradition been more fully developed. A series of geography texts and evaluations followed, in which place was accorded parity with other geographical dimensions such as space, time and nature. As McDowell wrote, "the significance of place has been reconstituted rather than undermined", by recent discussion (McDowell 1997, 67). The texts included Aitken and Valentine (2006), Holloway, Raice and Valentine (2003) and Bergman and Renwick (2008), although other ambitious texts still avoided the concept (Castree, Rogers and Sherman 2005). The volume edited by Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine (2004) *Key thinkers on Space and Place,* contained lots of comments on key thinkers but very little illumination on 'place'. There are, however, two outstanding exceptions to the paucity of conceptual analysis of place, and they are both sufficiently important to merit close attention, (Cresswell 1996 and 2004). These exceptions are Noel Castree and Doreen Massey, both of whom have made very significant contributions which have enlarged our understanding of place, and whose work is reviewed later.

In one of the classic studies of place that preceded the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, Luckermann (1964) argued that places have at least six constituent values: location; 'ensemble' (the integration of nature and culture); uniqueness; localized focusing power, emergence and meaning (to human agents). It is striking that this analysis of place anticipates much of the regalvanised debate during the last ten years. In a prescient piece published in *Cultural Anthropology,* Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argued strongly for an analysis of place that focuses on power relations, and which links place to the contradictions arising from globalization. In essence, 'imagined communities' needed to become attached to 'imagined places'.
"The irony of these times … is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct place become perhaps even more salient" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 10).

Within most academic discourse 'space' had been given much closer attention than 'place'. As McDowell suggests, this is because place is best seen as contextual: "the significance of place depends on the issue under consideration and the sets of social relations that are relevant to the issues" (McDowell 1997, 4). As we will argue later, place is frequently used in a way that takes

on meaning from the context in which it is employed, rather than conveying meaning itself. Modern science tended to disregard place by equating it with lack of generality (Casey 1997). In physics, geography, and social sciences the use of coordinates, maps, statistics, and other simplifying and objectifying pictures dominated the representation of places in spatial terms. The dimensions of, and actions in, space have similar meanings for everybody. Consequently, space allows scientists to adopt a role of outside observers of places, while the modern concept of "region" is often taken as a natural unit of spatial and social organization (Curry 2002). In social theories, space was assumed to be featureless and undifferentiated and was often used for predicting patterns of land-use and economic activities without describing place in any real sense except as a product of historical accident (Johnson 2002).

However, spatial representations of place were problematised during the second half of the twentieth century. Lefebvre (1974) and Foucault (1986) questioned the definition of absolute space in terms of Euclidean geometry, and claimed that regions are socially constructed. The human dimension of spatiality was emphasized and the notion of place acquired a renewed relevance not only among the disciplines which traditionally deal with place (e.g. geography, planning, chorography, and philosophy), but also among less related disciplines (e.g. anthropology, cultural studies, ecology, psychology, and phenomenology). Significant efforts for defining the concept and formulating an adequate theory of place have been developed from these disciplines. Although it is not clear whether the adoption of a unique definition would be either possible or desirable, these multiple perspectives of place agree that places are more than geographic settings with physical or spatial characteristics; they are fluid, changeable, dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory (Harrison and Dourish 1996, Stokowski 2002).

As we have seen Tuan (1977) argued that experiences of places involve perception, cognition, and affection. Similarly, Relph (1976) identified three components of place: physical setting, activities and meanings. According to these authors, a place cannot simply be described as the location of one object relative to others. The concept of place has to integrate both its location and its meaning in the context of human action. As Tuan (1977, 35) puts it: "place is space infused with human meaning".Working on similar lines, Agnew (1987) studied the relationship between place and human behavior and proposed a compositional view of places as being

constituted by economic, institutional, and socio-cultural processes. Agnew identified three basic elements of place: location, locale and sense of place. Location is the role a place plays in the world-economy; locale, the institutional setting of a place; and sense of place, the identities forged and given meaning within places.

Among the most important recent thinking about place is that of Doreen Massey and Noel Castree. Massey (1994) suggested a more dynamic view of places as "networks of social relations". According to her, places are continually changing as a result of economic, institutional and cultural transformation. Places are not essences but processes and places do not necessarily mean the same thing to everybody (Massey 1994). In addition, for Massey, the nature of a place is a product of its linkages with other places and not just a matter of its internal features. Places appear as points of intersection, integrating the global and the local. She writes that: "displacement, most particularly through migration, depends … on a prior notion of cultures embedded in place" (Massey and Jess 1995, 1). Determining place, "drawing boundaries in space… is always a social act". They add that the dominant notion of place, with which we are familiar "is one that arises as a result of the changes going on in the world around us" (Massey and Jess 1995, 63). For Massey place is not a free-standing concept, but one that should be used transitively, attaching itself to another 'object', that might help illuminate it. They end by providing almost a 'place' advocacy, which she terms a "progressive sense of place", through which geographers, and others, might take the part of communities and social classes.

Castree's contribution to the conceptualization of place is rather different. He argues that Marxist geographers were, "preoccupied with the inter-place connections more than specific place differences", in effect ignoring the saliency of place itself (Castree 2003, 170). While broadly sympathetic to the humanistic geographers' perspective on place, which sought to "recover people's sense of place … that is, how different individuals and groups ... develop meaningful attachments to those specific areas where they live out their lives…" (2003, 170), he invokes neurological circuit metaphors, 'switching points' and 'nodes' to suggest the degrees to which places are plugged into different sets of global relations. He argues that globalization has resulted "in an exciting and innovative redefinition of what place means", seeing "place differences as both cause and effect of place connections" (Castree 2003, 166).

Following these authors, Cresswell (2004) suggests a structural view of place which promotes a holistic and relational understanding of place instead of a compositional perspective (which just considers the socio-economic make-up of places). According to this author, this structural view would include the following measurable components of place: economic role, institutional setting, political-cultural identity, linkages with other places, and changes over time.

Although human geographers pioneered the exploration of the concept of 'sense of place' (Relph 1997, Hay 1998, Cross 2001) the configuration had several meanings. 'Sense of place' signalled: (1) A set of personal, family, and community narratives that include features of a setting, (2) the attribution of non-material characteristics to a place, that is, the 'soul' of a place; its *genius loci*, (3) tacit knowledge of a place, which would include the ability to describe a plant or an outcropping of rock without being able to put a name to either, and (4) a synthetic but unsystematised body of knowledge about a place. In this last meaning, systematic knowledge of place is embedded in an unarticulated system of a higher order: *knowledge* about parts but a *sense* of the whole.

'Sense of place' has also been used in sociology. Hummon (1992, 164) suggested the following definition:

"By sense of place, I mean people's subjective perceptions of their environments and the more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretative perspective *on* the environment and an emotional reaction *to* the environment … Sense of place involves a personal orientation toward place, in which one understands of place and one's feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning".

In anthropology, Kort (2001) argues that ethnographers and anthropologists have in the last half century started to find place (or human spatiality) more attractive. Kort develops a theory of human place-relations in which he identifies three kinds of relations: (1) cosmic or comprehensive, (2) social, and (3) personal or intimate. This typology has some parallels with those of Flint et al. (2000). But perhaps the most interesting contribution from among

anthropologists is that of Arturo Escobar. Drawing on his own ethnography in coastal Pacific communities of Colombia, Escobar points out that indigenous and black activist there came together in place-based struggles to defend their territory. Second place is an important concept, "more philosophically, because place continues to be an important source of culture and identity, despite the pervasive delocalisation of social life" (Escobar 2009, 10). More challenging is his third reason for emphasising place:

> "Third, because scholarship in the past two decades in many fields (geography, anthropology, political economy, communications etc.) has tended to de-emphasise place and to highlight, on the contrary, movement, displacement, travelling, diaspora, migration and so forth. Thus there is a need for a corrective theory that neutralises this erasure of place, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to the 'global' and far too little to 'place'. (Escobar 2009, 10).

In environmental psychology, Canter (1997) developed a theory involving four interrelated facets of place: (1) functional differentiation (related to activities), (2) place objectives (related to individual, social and cultural experiences), (3) scale of interaction, and (4) aspects of design (related to physical characteristics), each with a number of subcategories. In this theory, place is considered as a holistic transactional entity and, consequently, is not reduced to isolated components. Environmental psychologists, however, often address issues of place through the concept of 'place attachment' (Altman and Low 1992,) and its two interrelated dimensions of 'place dependence' (i.e. functional attachment) (Stokols and Shumaker 1981), and 'place identity' (i.e. emotional attachment) (Proshansky et al. 1983, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). There exists a great terminological and conceptual diversity of approaches to 'place attachment' (Giuliani and Feldman 1993). However, Hidalgo and Hernández (2001: 274) assert that, "currently, there seems to exist a consensus in the use of the term 'place attachment'. In general, place attachment is defined as an affective bond or link between people and specific places."

According to this definition, place attachment is bound up with environmental settings but not only to the physical aspects of a space. Furthermore, for some environmental psychologists, place attachment goes beyond affective bonds. Steel (2000) identified five key elements characterizing

place attachment theories: (1) affective tone (either positive or negative), (2) a sense of personal involvement and interdependence linked to one's identity, (3) caring for and knowledge of a place, (4) behaviours that imply stability and continuing commitment to a place, and (5) a developmental or temporal component. Manzo (2003) identified an emergent perspective of the psychological study of people-place relationships. This perspective challenges earlier approaches that see relationships to place as individualistic, mentalist and apolitical (cf. Dixon and Durrheim 2000). According to Manzo (2003), this new perspective reveals how people's relationships to places are complex and dynamic, include an array of places and experiences, and have a collectively shared, conscious and contested political nature. Consequently, people are seen as active shapers of places and place meanings as existing within larger socio-political milieu.

Another psychologist, Gustafson (2001) has articulated a tentative analytical framework for mapping and understanding the attribution of meaning to places, which is consistent with the integrative perspective. This author classified within a three-pole scheme constituted by 'self', 'others', and 'environment' the meaning of place expressed by a variety of respondents. Instead of considering the three poles as discrete categories, Gustafson (2001:10) settled for a three-pole triangular model within which various meanings of place could be mapped, not only in the three poles, but also in-between them. The model is complemented with four underlying dimensions of meaning: (1) 'distinction' (involving comparison with other places), (2) positive or negative 'valuation' of places, (3) continuity, and (4) change. The interplay of the last two introduces a temporal dimension in which places are regarded as processes. Places are dynamic and changing, but they also maintain an identity. The tension between these elements affords place a role both in structures and in agency.

Within the environmental literature, the concept of place, and related terms such as sense of place, bioregionalism, place attachment, environmental relationship, and glocalization are acquiring increasing relevance. Place has been proposed as a useful concept for improving ecosystem management (Mitchell et al. 1993, Williams and Stewart 1998, Galliano and Loeffler 1999). These proposals suggest that managers are better equipped for managing particular settings if they are aware of the divergent meanings that various stakeholders attach to these settings. Williams and Vaske (2003) operationalized this approach to management by examining

the validity and generability of quantitative measures of attachment to nature-based places. According to these authors, natural places are more than containers of natural resources and staging areas for enjoyable activities. They are locations filled with history, memories, and emotional and symbolic meanings. Williams and Vaske (2003) argue that their results demonstrate how place bonds can be systematically identified and measured and how people develop different levels and forms of attachment to different places.

Similarly, Cheng et al. (2003) report the emergence and persistence of 'place-based' collaborations for environmental management as a relatively recent phenomenon in which individuals with different perspectives work together to define and address common resource management issues bounded to a geographic place. These authors claim the existence of a politics of place in natural resource management. The politics of place emphasizes problem solving, trust building, and on-the-ground consensual actions, rather than approving or opposing single-issue policy positions favored by coalitions, which characterizes the politics of interest. Thus, the voices and values of actors are centered on places rather than on political positions. According to these authors the existence of a politics of place could be explained by the possibility that a place (i.e. a distinct geographic area toward which all collaboration participants express value) acts as a central organizing principle for collaboration, different actors bringing their own politics of interest to bear on place... Cheng et al. (2003) define place as socially constructed, and continually reconstructed, through social and political processes that assign meaning. This should remind those who manage the environment that resources exist in a meaning-filled spatial (and temporal) context.

Empty spaces at the geographical margin: the Mexican Caribbean coast

How then, are 'places' inflected with meaning and socially constructed, while filling a specific spatial and temporal context? In the following case study we take a geographical location which has long played a role in international economic processes, but lies at the margins of spatially-defined relations. Before the Spanish Conquest the Yucatan peninsula had been densely populated with indigenous people, the Maya. However, the recent history of the Mexican Caribbean coast begins with the construction of Cancun in the 1970s. Before that the area to the south, the coast of today's Quintana Roo, and the major focus for mass tourism in Mexico, was

widely regarded as an 'empty space'. Today a myth has developed around Cancun that probably explains why so much of its history is unwritten. One of the foremost tourist guides to the area says:

> "Cancun, until very recently, was an unknown area. Formerly it was a fishing town but over a period of thirty years it evolved into a place that has become famous worldwide. It is located in the south-east of Mexico with no more 'body' to it than the living spirit of the Mayas, a race that mysteriously disappeared and who were one of the great pre-Columbian cultures in Mexico. The only thing that remained was the land transformed into a paradise on earth'.
> (Everest 2002).

This extract reveals all the major myths about the area: the coast was uninhabited when it was first 'discovered'; it embodied the spirit of the ancient Maya (who had mysteriously disappeared); while the few remaining mortals who survived the Spanish Conquest were thought to be in possession of 'paradise'. These three myths guide much of the 'Maya World' tourist discourse today, which has helped to draw millions of people into the area and provided one of the most rapid rates of urban growth in Latin America. The myths asserted that: space was devoid of culture, Indians were devoid of ancestors, and paradise was waiting to be 'discovered'. However, if we examine these claims closely it is possible to distinguish ways in which the metaphorical grounding of tourist expansion borrows from earlier travel writing, such as the use of pioneer 'succession' as an organic process, the preference for the natural sublime over human landscapes, and the utilisation of 'virgin' resources (Jones 2003, Martins 2000, Salvatore 1996).

Recent research in geography, and in history, has benefited from a more reflective view of space, and an active search for its properties and significance over time (Lefebvre 1991). Space and place are no longer 'givens' in intellectual history; the blank parchment on which human purposes are written. Some writers even argue that they should be seen as enactment or performance: constructions of the human imagination, as well as materiality. In the view of Nicholas Bromley, for example: "space [is present] in both property's discursive and material

enactments. Space like property, is active, not static. [And] spaces of violence must be recognised as social achievements, rather than as social facts" (Blomley 2003). As we have seen, this analysis of the active engagement of human populations with space has served to define much of the recent writing on place. On this reading, space and place assume a role previously denied them, and perform a transitive, active role in the making of historical events.

This 'active', conceptualisation of place and space carries implications for the way in which we view resource peripheries, particularly within the context of 'globalisation', a process that is increasingly seen as pre-dating modernity, rather than an outcome of it (Hayter, Barnes and Bradshaw 2003:15). Geographical places are ascribed, figuratively, temporally and spatially, in ways that serve to influence succeeding events. Their 'discovery' and 'invention' are acknowledged as part of powerful myths, which are worked and re-worked by human agents, serving to create a sense of place as important as the material worlds that are described.

It is suggested that re-working place in cultural terms consists of separate but linked processes, in which location in space is associated with what Luckermann (1964) termed 'ensemble', the integration of nature and culture. These processes can sometimes be viewed sequentially, each providing a different construction of place and, in the case of the Mexican Caribbean, are characterised by distinctive generations of resource users and settlers. In charting the resource histories of places, and the histories of the visitors and tourists who have 'discovered' them, we are engaged in continually re-working a narrative. The social processes through which we come to identify place over time resemble a series of 'successions' (Cronon 1996).

The process through which existential places are created, from within the fabric of environmental history, is seen clearly in the accounts of the Caribbean coast of Mexico: today's State of Quintana Roo. Over time we view a 'wilderness', a redoubt of pirates and looters, an 'ancient civilisation' discovered by archaeologists, an abandoned space utilised by entrepreneurial hoteliers and, today, a 'tropical paradise' promising escape for international tourists.

Tropical places, abandoned spaces

The coastal resort of Playa del Carmen, today one of the most rapidly growing urban centres in Latin America, was 'discovered' in the summer of 1966, according to one account in a tourist magazine:

> "Playa was discovered by a sixteen year old boy, in the summer of 1966. A momentous event, which changed forever the face of history for this small fishing village… In 1966 Fernando Barbachano Herrero, born of a family of pioneers, arrived there and found it inhabited by about eighty people, with a single pier made of local (chico) zapote wood. Fernando befriended the local landowner, Roman Xian Lopez, and spent the next two years trying to talk him into relinquishing some of his land… (Playa 1999, 4).

Two years later, in 1968, Fernando Barbachano bought twenty-seven hectares of this land adjacent to the beach for just over $13,000 (US), or six cents a square meter. In 2003 it was sold for worth about $400 (US) a square metre, an increase of over six thousand per cent. Today this piece of real estate constitutes less than ten per cent of Playa's prime tourist development. As Playa developed, piers were built for the increasing number of tourist craft, and game fishers, hotels and bars were constructed fronting the 'virgin' beach, and clubs were opened a short way from the shoreline. The first hotel to be constructed was Hotel Molcas, in the 1970s, next to the little ferry terminal to the Island of Cozumel. Gradually, more people were attracted to the tourist potential of Playa, and its 'history' was rediscovered when it was claimed in the local newspaper that the town had been founded by a *chicle* (the raw material for chewing gum*)* contractor on November 14th 1902, giving today's mega-resort a provenance that it had previously lacked. Today the town possesses shopping malls, selling designer clothes and global brands. International gourmet restaurants compete for the lucrative tourist business; twenty five million tourists visited Mexico in 2007. Today, the beaches draw migrants from all over Mexico, particularly the poorer states such as Chiapas, and the town's hinterland contains squatter settlements as large as any in urban Latin America. These areas have names which sometimes suggest wider political struggles: like 'Donaldo Colosio', a 'squatter' area named after a

prominent politician in the PRI (Party of the Institutional Revolution) who, in 1994 was murdered by a crime syndicate in Tijuana.

Tourist 'pioneers' had taken an interest in the Mexican Caribbean coast even before Fernando Barbachano stumbled upon the resort potential of Playa Del Carmen. In the longer view tourist expansion on the coast of Quintana Roo can be compared with the trade in dyewood three hundred years earlier, or of mahogany and *chicle* during the last century (Redclift 2004). All three were milestones in the development of the region, and linked it with global markets and consumers. Each possessed their own 'pioneers', like Fernando Barbachano, who 'discovered' a land of rich natural resources, apparently unworked by human hand. It is worth recalling that the account of Playa's 'discovery' in the passage above refers to a "single pier made of local *zapote* wood…" Chicozapote was the tree from which *chicle* (chewing gum resin) was tapped. The chicle industry occupied what had become an 'abandoned space'.

After the demise of chicle production in the 1940s the coast of Quintana Roo experienced the slow growth of specialised tourism. Between the late 1920s and 1940s several hotels were built on the Island of Cozumel, which lies off the coast opposite Playa Del Carmen, the Hotels Yuri and Playa, but at this time most visitors to what are today major Mayan archaeological sites on the mainland, still slept in improvised cabins. The majority of tourists still left Cozumel by boat; landed on the mainland coast at Tankah, stayed briefly at the most important copra estate nearby, and then either cut a path through the jungle to Tulum, or took a boat along the coast.

In this they were beating a track that had been followed by earlier pioneers, the most famous of whom were John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, the 'giants' of Mayan archaeology in the mid nineteenth century. Stephens and Catherwood had already explored the major Mayan sites of northern Yucatan, such as Chichen Itza and Uxmal, and arrived in Valladolid at the end of March 1841. They made enquiries about getting to the Caribbean coast, no mean feat at the time since there were no roads. "It is almost impossible to conceive what difficulty we had in learning anything definite concerning the road we ought to take", Stephens reported to his diary (Stephens 1988, 168). After travelling to the north coast he went on to land at Cozumel, at the only

inhabited spot, the ranch of San Miguel, where they record that "our act of taking possession was unusually exciting". Here they stopped to feast on turtle and fresh water, strolled along the shoreline picking up shells, and went to sleep in their hammocks, "as piratical a group as ever scuttled a ship at sea" (Stephens1988, 170). The island of Cozumel had been 'discovered' several times before; once 'by accident' it is said, when Juan de Grijalva caught sight of it in March 1518, having set sail from Cuba. Unlike Grijalva, three centuries earlier, John Stephens knew where he was in 1841 and noted for the benefit of the 'Modern Traveller' that they alone had proprietorship of "this desolate island"(Stephens 1988, 175.

It was another century after Stephens' visit with Catherwood that modern tourism arrived in Cozumel, with the construction of Hotel Playa and the patronage of an influential American, William Chamberlain. From about 1952 onwards Chamberlain enticed numerous foreigners to the area, and constructed the first tourist cabañas, which he named 'Hotel Mayalum'. This was also the first recorded attempt to link the region and its coastal tourist attractions to the cultural life of the Maya, the historical antecedents of the 'Maya World', the brand name for most of this zone today.

In Mexico Cozumel had blazed a modest trail as a tourist destination, followed by Isla Mujeres, where relatively small hotels and guest-houses began to cluster around the small central plaza, and provided important facilities for discriminating groups of Mexicans and Americans anxious to avoid large-scale tourism. By 1975 ninety thousand tourists were visiting Isla Mujeres annually. Behind much of this growth were powerful new political interests, later to play a part in the development of Cancun, and linked to the person of President Luis Echevarria, whose godfather was a leading businessman on the island.

During the 1960s fourteen new hotels were built in Cozumel, with a total of four hundred beds; an apparently modest figure in the light of subsequent developments. But by the end of the decade, fifty seven thousand tourists had visited the island; two thirds of them foreigners. This remarkable success prompted some of the inhabitants to examine their own histories more carefully. It was soon revealed that almost the entire population was made up of 'pioneers', or

'founders' (*forjadores*). Refugees from the Caste War had in fact repopulated the island shortly after Stephens and Catherwood's visit, contrary to the prevailing view created by global tourism that the Mexican Caribbean lacked any identity of its own. Unlike the rebel Maya who held the mainland, the twenty-two families of refugees who arrived in Cozumel in 1848, felt themselves to be the only surviving 'Mexicans' on the peninsula (Dachary and Arnaiz 1998).

Cozumel had played an important advance role in tourist development because, apart from its roster of former *chicle* entrepreneurs, who were interested in putting their capital into a profitable new business, it also boasted an airport, originally built during the Second World War for United States airport reconnaissance. Cozumel had traditionally been a staging post for the natural resources of the region; now it was a natural watering hole for foreign tourists, moving in the opposite direction. Unlike Cancun, however, the pioneers and founders of Cozumel had been its own indigenous bourgeoisie (Antochiw and Dachary 2001, Jones and Ward 1994).

The development of Cancun, beginning in the 1970s, made earlier tourist incursions seem very modest indeed. In the view of some observers Cancun was chosen because the Mexican Caribbean was like a political tinderbox, liable to explode at any time. Cancun was not simply a gigantic tourist playground, in this view, it was an 'abandoned space' on the frontier, which needed to be 'settled, employed and occupied'. Even in 1970 almost half of the population of Cancun was from outside Quintana Roo; as the zone developed it pulled in people from all over southeast Mexico (Murray 2007).

The history of Cancun, like that of Cozumel and Isla Mujeres demonstrates that they were 'empty spaces' in the minds of planners and developers, but they were not devoid of history. The large, sophisticated resorts which have been established on the Mexican Caribbean coast have been constructed as 'places', and increasingly are associated with accompanying myths and ascribed histories. These include connections with piracy (the all-inclusive 'Capitan Lafitte' hotel complex), with a local tourist pioneer (the Hotel Molcas in Playa, and Pablo Bush Romero, the 'founder' of Akumal) and even, most recently, with the history of *chicle*/chewing gum (in the form of a chicle 'village', Pueblo Chiclero built for tourists to visit when they disembarked from their cruise liners in Majahual).

The Mexican Caribbean provides several examples of the process of 'place construction' referred to in the literature above. Following Massey (1994) we can see the area as a dense network of social relations, which at different periods of time have brought the geographical periphery close to global systems of trade and power over resources. As Massey avers, the nature of a place is a product of its linkages with other places, not just a reflection of its internal features. The ways in which places are 'plugged into' different circuits of capital also suggests something of the dynamism and innovation identified by Castree (2005). In the Mexican Caribbean tourist economies have developed which build upon previous entrepots, notably *chicle/*chewing gum, even incorporating their historical detail, the materiality of their design, into new tourist 'products', such as '*chicle* camps' and wooden jetties. The local and 'unique' (Luckermann 1964) are refashioned for global consumers and audiences. Place is re-worked in terms of its own history.

This has also prompted different and contrasting accounts of the history of place. An example is the naming of places such as Playa Del Carmen, the largest urban settlement south of Cancun. 'Playa', the resort has a very different discursive quality from the other two, alternative names that are in use. One is '*Solidaridad'* (Solidarity) the official name for the municipal district of which Playa is the major part, which reflects a national history rooted in the Mexican Revolutionary conflict. Similarly the Mayan term for Playa, *X'aman H'a,* carries quite different connotations of place, bound up with the importance of Playa to the symbolic world of the Mayan ancestors. 'Places' reflect and perpetuate these different parameters of culture and power, and illuminate the tension between what was 'there' or 'not there' (in Gertrude Stein's famous aphorism for her home town of Oakland, California) and what has been rediscovered subsequently.

Conclusion

The discussion of place, as we have seen, is closely linked to governing paradigms and systems of explanation. It thus possesses the potential to both signal something about location and the meaning which is attached to it. We have considered the Mexican Caribbean as a case study of the way in which place is constructed at the geographical margins of space, in economies

previously dominated by extractive industries, such as hardwoods and *chicle,* places which in this case are being transformed rapidly into global tourist destinations. We have referred to this dual conceptual role as 'place confirmation', to underline the centrality of the idea of place both as location and the association of meanings with location. Like gender and nature, the meaning of place may be negotiable but its importance in the canon of concepts available to environmental sociology suggests considerable room for further development.

In the absence of systematic quantitative methods, place acquired a largely positivist mantle before the 'ideological decades' of the 1970s and 1980s, and its apologists acquired a quantitative zeal. The 'cultural turn' and post-modernism revealed a new emphasis on the human face of 'place' and its social construction, in which rather than being buried by globalization it offered a new form of conceptual revival. For both Marxists and neoliberals, place has suggested the interface of global structures and localized pockets of resistance – a regrouping of social expression in a locus of space. Its derivatives have opened up a new lexicon – emplacement, displacement, sense of place – with which to slay the dragon of global, place-less modernity, all flows and essences. One of the routes in to place-confirmation, then, is clearly through enlarging the way that the concept of place is employed.

Another, second point of entry is through recognizing the sociological processes which condition us to think about place: its naturalization. This naturalization is important not just in the more conservative, bounded sense of place as 'mosaic', the traditional way in which geographers viewed 'places', but also in the more relational way place is employed today: place and identity, place and memory, place and belonging. A sense of place clearly exists in memory (and is institutionalized in memorializing), and this sense of place appears and disappears as places are discovered, erased and rediscovered. The Mexican Caribbean coast serves as an example of this kind of process, and might lead us to ask questions about what lies behind the erasure and discovery of place. What do these processes tell us about societies and their histories? To develop conceptually, the idea of place needs to be linked to alternative visions of spatial polity in which history is an essential element, rather than a later embellishment.

Finally, the analysis of place requires the acknowledgement of ambiguities that are central to thinking in contemporary environmental sociology. Places are collectively shared and contested. They do not necessarily mean the same thing to everybody. They are not 'owned' in the same way by everybody. This observation is also clearly true of the academic disciplines which have utilized place. In the world of academic discourse place is often part of a critique, and exists on an intellectual terrain. However, in the 'lived' world of experience place also has phenomenological import – it can be an affirmation of humanity, and in that sense critique alone does it a disservice. Acknowledging the hybridity of place provides another route into place-confirmation, distancing the concept from its more descriptive history, and opening up the possibility of place as a more heuristic device, a way of understanding society rather than a point from which to view it.

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