Doreen Massey

Starting out as an economic geographer, Doreen Massey (1944-2016) made transformative methodological contributions both within and far beyond that field, shaping the ascendant project of feminist geography, influencing the discipline of geography as a whole, and impacting the wider worlds of social theory and progressive politics. Coming from a working-class background in the northern British city of Manchester, Massey studied Geography at Oxford and then Regional Science at the University of Pennsylvania. She spent the first part of her career at the Centre for Environmental Studies, a London-based think tank, before taking up the position of Professor of Geography at the Open University, where she worked until her (official) retirement. Along with Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin, Massey was a founding editor of the journal *Soundings*.

Doreen Massey made space for new theoretical and methodological approaches in critical human geography. Her methodological approach was inherently ‘relational,’ building understandings, concepts, and rationales for intellectual and political action in ways that worked with, across, and out from real-world conjunctures, complex articulations, and (often local) sites of intersecting causal determination. She was, in many respects, a quintessential geographer, albeit in a far more expansive manner than disciplinary home once implied. Throughout her career, Massey worked to connect research, teaching, activism, and public engagement in ways that would extend far beyond the relatively small world of disciplinary geography, inspiring subsequent generations of students and researchers to ‘think’ and ‘do’ geography differently.
Massey’s work had the capacity to invoke not just an intimate and intricate sense of place, but also a global sense of spatially open theoretical and political horizons. Against essentialist forms of (pre)determination and foreclosure, hers was an approach tuned into social and spatial difference, into the simultaneous connectivity and uniqueness of localities, and into the difference that space itself makes, to politics as well as theory. Massey’s early work on industrial restructuring pioneered the use of ‘intensive’ case-study research, positioning place-specific experiences of workplace change in relation both to sedimented local histories (and the complex ‘layering’ of rounds of investment) and to the constitutive web of more-than-local relations (spatial divisions of labor, with their ‘stretched out’ modes of long-distance governance). Subsequently, her influential formulation of the ‘global sense of place’ contested received understandings of the local as static, singular, and insular, and places as inert repositories of tradition and ossified social relations, replacing this with a more dynamic and ultimately progressive conception of place as a site of intersecting trajectories, diversity and multiplicity, and political potential. ‘Geography matters,’ a phrase indelibly associated with Doreen Massey’s transformative contributions, is a theme that runs through the following discussion, which tracks career-long concerns with economic restructuring, with feminist politics and methods, and with progressive conceptions of place and space. In the process, she would work with considerable methodological dexterity in the spaces between radical political economy and feminist theory, between critical realism and poststructuralism, and between the local and the global.

Restructuring regions

“In what sense a regional problem?” was the question that Massey posed at the beginning of her program of work on industrial restructuring, initially in collaboration with Richard Meegan, which would culminate in the path-breaking book, Spatial Divisions of Labor (Massey 1984). This contribution would mark a paradigm shift in economic geography. The book presented an in-depth
and finely grained analysis of a particular historical conjuncture—the onset of deindustrialization in
the United Kingdom, together with some of the first moves in what would later be characterized as
the globalization of production networks. But it was also very much a product of that same
conjuncture. The rules of the game were changing in real time, not least for those blue-collar regions
of the north and west of the United Kingdom that had been important players in earlier phases of
industrial growth, but which were now subject, in the context of intensifying international
competition, macroeconomic instability, and industrial-relations strife, to waves of plant closures,
capital flight, surging unemployment, and industrial dislocation. There was a sense, Massey (1995b, 309) later reflected, that “the usual categories of economic geography,” and along with this
conventional approaches to methodology and theory building, were “simply not good enough.”
Her approach was to “break into the system of causation” at the level of the (capitalist) system as a
whole, rather than to take this as a pre-given and taken-for-granted point of departure (Massey and
Meegan 1985, 6), a receipt not simply for macro-scale analysis or for the (impossible) ‘study of
everything’, but for taking seriously the relational connections that make up—and construct—
capitalism as a moving, uneven, and contradictory system. Neither was this a matter of documenting
(or affirming) supposedly inexorable ‘logics’ of the system, as if these were somehow mechanical
laws, universal in effect. Instead, Massey’s approach involved the closely focused explorations of
local-scale changes in employment practices, production configurations, and technology utilization,
industry by industry, in order to demonstrate that spatial outcomes could not be simply ‘read off
from’ some ostensibly global logic of the system, but were in fact mediated through corporate
strategies, workplace struggles, class and gender relations, political cultures, and more. Her argument
was that the geographically differentiated conditions of production, including the availability and cost
of labor, represented more than an inert surface across which profit-seeking firms maximize returns.
Rather, the relationship between the dynamics of accumulation and the shifting geographies of production and employment was one of reciprocal interaction and mutual adaptation. In this way, the spatiality of political-economic processes was integral to how those processes worked, not some secondary, derivative, or complicating factor. In this style of ‘thinking uneven development,’ geographical difference shaped the very nature of economic-restructuring processes, not just their contingent form, while local economies were to be understood in terms of the historical accretion, and complex combination, of roles played in different spatial divisions of labor.

While sometimes misinterpreted, or over-simplified, “as a geological metaphor of the layering of strata,” this conception of the geographically differentiated layering of rounds of investment over time, is “more accurately a metaphor of interaction and articulation” (Meegan, 2017, 1288). Massey’s method of articulation involved theorizing both with and across difference, working meticulously through relations, connections, and interdependencies, while refusing to freeze (or reify) particular combinations as paradigmatic cases or ideal types. As Graham (1998, 942) put it, “in Massey’s world things are related to each other not primarily through replication or reflection (sameness) but through articulation—the transformative intellectual and social process of creating connections and generating in the process unique beings, situations, and possibilities.” She was cutting an intermediate path, in other words, between totalizing approaches to theory, metanarratives based on iron-clad laws and predictable outcomes, and that class of ‘local’ theories calibrated only to the particular and idiographic. “Connection, as well as differentiation, are what it is all about,” she would say of the Spatial Divisions of Labor approach; “outcomes are always uncertain, history—and geography—have to be made” (Massey 1995b, 303-304).

The purpose of empirical research was not to identify regularities or to trace patterns, but to specify the always-mediated working out of underlying mechanisms. Theory building, in this context, was a
matter of rigorous conceptualization and reflexive elaboration, often in the ‘laboratory’ of a particular case or situation, with a special place being reserved for mid-level concepts, those that allow researchers navigate between the dynamics of capitalist restructuring in different branches of industry through to localized (contingent and often contested) outcomes, and back again.

Sympathetic readings of this approach portrayed it as an inventive mode of ‘micro-structuralism’ (Cochrane 1987), while others complained that it amounted to a retreat from (abstract) Marxian theory, unproductively freighted with the weight of contingency and complexity, if not a ‘cover’ for a return to empiricism (Harvey 1987).

While never entirely comfortable with the label ‘Marxist,’ Massey (1995b, 312) maintained that her central concerns were “clearly related to historical materialism.” Spatial Divisions of Labor is properly read as a dexterous elaboration and extension of this approach, rather than some postmodern repudiation. The book invokes received conceptions like the forces and relations of production, and the dialectics of uneven and combined development, in order to follow these more abstract formulations through the structurally necessary mediations of (industrial) sector and (regional) space. Its goal is not to flatten out or trivialize the patterned specificities of industrial restructuring, locality effects, and the complex recombination of class and gender relations, or to subsume them within reductionist categories of analysis, but instead to work through them in pursuit of conjunctural forms of explanation. This was never a matter of tuning into the noise rather than the underlying signal, or a receipt for wallowing in local details and confounding contingencies, as if for their own sake; it was about constructing more grounded, engaged, and ultimately relevant forms of explanation, with political as well as theoretical traction, about specifying the stakes of social struggle, along with sites of potential contestation and progressive intervention.

Feminist geographies
Writing with Linda McDowell, in the same year that *Spatial Divisions of Labor* was published, Doreen Massey made a signal contribution to the emergent project of feminist geography in their paper, ‘A woman’s place?’ Drawing contrasts between four regions of the United Kingdom with distinctive histories of industrial development (the coal-mining areas of the north-east, gang labor in East Anglian agriculture, factory work in the northern cotton towns, and the sweated-labor regime of inner London), the paper demonstrated that deep-seated geographical differences in work practices, cultures, and politics were more than historical relics, but in in their ongoing and unique intersections of class and gender relations remained “distinct in different ways” (McDowell and Massey 1984, 129).

Looking back at the arguments in *Spatial Divisions of Labor*, Massey (1995b, 345, 341) later reflected that while “gender [was] essential to the empirical story,” the book itself was not self-consciously positioned in “what was at the time defined as the field of feminist geography” per se. Instead, it had been written and received as a contribution to the rather staid discipline of industrial geography, which until that point had remained largely impervious not only to the feminist impulse but also to the problematization of gender relations. Notably, *Politics and Method*, the path-breaking collection that can be credited with opening up methodological debates in industrial geography, while paving the way for a post-positivist embrace of qualitative methods trained on the intensive exploration of “how causal processes work out in specific cases” (Massey and Meegan 1985, 6) there was some discussion of “women workers,” but none of feminist methods. Massey nevertheless maintained that she had tackled *Spatial Divisions of Labor* “as a feminist,” albeit “one who in those days was more politically engaged than theoretically sophisticated” (1995b, 342).

These feminist commitments, however, would soon begin to define Massey’s project, not least in her excoriating critique of the masculinist gaze evident David Harvey’s *Condition of Postmodernity* and Ed Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* (Massey 1991), but also in a methodologically innovative exploration
of the “hidden abodes” of social reproduction as a constitutive (pre)condition for the much-vaunted model of high-tech production (Massey 1995a). Another line of work critiqued the inherent masculinism of globalization narratives, even in the hands of critics of capitalist triumphalism, who saw the world as if from a height of 35,000 feet, a jetsetter’s perspective that only served to reproduce the mainstream conceit of placeless market integration.

For Massey, feminist methodological and political sensibilities demanded much more than merely ‘adding women in.’ They were integral to the kind of relational theorizing that she advocated, which involved the deconstruction of received categories of analysis, especially those predicated on binaries and dualisms, in the service of an ongoing project of “re-thinking the way we think” (see Massey 1991, 1995b). It was these feminist commitments, in dialogue with Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding, and alongside a pattern of extensive involvement in political struggles, campaigns, and projects (from the British coalminers’ strike and the municipal socialism of the Greater London Council to collaborations with activists in Nicaragua and Venezuela), that informed another of Massey’s signature concepts, that of the ‘global sense of place’ (Massey 1994).

Massey saw place as fundamentally “relational … neither a bounded enclosure [nor] a privileged site of meaning-making, but rather as a subset of the interactions which constitute [social] space, a local articulation within a wider whole” (Massey 1994, 4). She argued for a processual understanding of place, not least as a site of political potential. Neither nostalgic nor parochial, this global sense of place reflected feminist sensibilities, being simultaneously intimate, positional, and political, while forged in relation to other places and scales. It entailed a “politics of connectivity and responsibility which looks beyond the gates to the strangers without” (Massey 1994, 17).

Placing space
Massey’s was a relational understanding of space, ‘all the way up.’ Contrary to commonplace equation of the ‘global space’ with the abstract, the rootless, and the endlessly fluid, she maintained the global is really “no more than the sum of relations, connections, embodiments and practices [of] things are utterly everyday and grounded at the same time as they may, when linked together, go around the world” (Massey 2004, 8). The global, in this sense, is no less ‘concrete,’ no less socially constructed or politically shaped, than local places. Yet the orthodox vision of globalization as an ‘out there’ domain of uncontrollable forces and universalizing pressures was clearly doing political work of its own, casting local places as ‘victims,’ while constraining, distorting, and foreclosing alternative political projects, strategies, and imaginaries. It was against this denuded construction of place that Massey argued for an open, indeterminate, and progressive sense of place, the ground from which alternative models and visions could be developed, according to the principles of egalitarianism, respect, responsibility, and democratic deepening.

This intertwining of relational thinking and relational politics was a hallmark of Massey’s work throughout her career. It would play a foundational role in the final political project on which she worked, *The Kilburn Manifesto*, a collaboration with her North London neighbors Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin, which sought to think through, and beyond, the conjuncture of late neoliberalism and the lingering moment of the post-2008 global financial crisis. But it also reflected Massey’s longtime conviction that while “places are unique … that does not make them inimical to theory” (Graham 1998, 942). On the contrary, thinking through and ‘out of’ place was for Massey a radicalizing project, both theoretically and politically. Thinking of place in relational terms, as “a local articulation within a wider whole,” involved a radical alternative to mainstream conceptions of time and space, for if “space is a product of practices, trajectories, interrelations, if we make space through interactions at all levels, from the (so-called) local to the (so called) global, then those spatial identities such as
places, regions, nations, and the local and the global, must be forged in this relational way too, as internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing” (Massey 1994, 4; 2004, 5).

Massey would draw out two fundamental implications of this radical rethinking of space and place. First, against the conventional understanding of time as dynamic and future-making, with space as its inert other, she rejected the idea of a convergent global future, led by some places while others must scramble to ‘catch up,’ arguing that those places that are left behind in this developmentalist narrative have effectively been denied equal standing, along with the space to imagine—and perhaps take—alternative pathways of their own making. Second, Massey also took issue with planar conceptions of space, as a surface over which journeys are made, contending that this colonializing imaginary has the effect of compressing multiple histories and geographies into a master narrative of modernity. If, insisted, space and place were to be understood in terms of constellations and conjunctures, as sites shaped by the ongoing interaction and intermixing of lives and stories, then it follows that space-time exists as a domain of ‘simultaneity,” of ongoing, trajectories, or what she called “stories-so-far.”

Indeed, the openness that Massey accords to space, of place as a space of potential, was never divorced from her preoccupation with its unevenly distributed (and contested) potential. Against all-encompassing visions of time-space compression, Massey made the case for a more intricate conception of socio-spatial difference and multiple identities, sensitive to the ways in which ‘power geometries’ variously include, exclude, connect, divide, empower, and disempower different social groups. This feminist sensibility encompasses the (emplaced) research process, and a host of related issues concerning the positionality and responsibilities of researchers, for these too must be
understood relationally, involving as they do the negotiation of tangled hierarchies of difference, spatially as well as socially.

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Further readings


References


