

Doreen Massey (1944-2016): an appreciation

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Readers of *Soundings* will probably know Doreen Massey best as one of its founding editors, for her articles and editorials in the journal and for her editorship (with Stuart Hall and Mike Rustin) of the *Kilburn Manifesto*. As well as this, Doreen also had a long and highly distinguished career as an academic geographer at the Open University, and was a life-long political activist, socialist, feminist and internationalist, a prolific author of books, articles and essays and a hugely charismatic public speaker. She was also an inspiring teacher and mentor, not least to her PhD students, of whom I was privileged to be one.

I first met Doreen in 1984 at a talk for geography students to mark the publication of her new book, *Spatial Divisions of Labour*.¹ Two years earlier she had been appointed Professor of Geography at the Open University, a post she would go on to hold for a further twenty-five years until her retirement in 2009. She had already published two notable books - *Capital and Land* (with Alejandrina Catalano) in 1978 and *The Anatomy of Job Loss* (with Richard Meegan) in 1982 - but it was *Spatial Divisions of Labour* that would establish her reputation for re-thinking economic geography by combining Marxist economic and class analysis with a novel approach to understanding space and place.² As a new undergraduate in 1984 I was quickly discovering that the conceptual underpinnings of much of the human geography I had learnt at school was the object of a number of excoriating critiques by academic geographers from a range of theoretical and political perspectives. Doreen was central to this debate and her talk was both a revelation and an inspiration.

In particular, the 'quantitative revolution' in geography was being called into question. Taking the subject by storm in the 1960s, this had involved a concerted attempt to move geography away from its perceived reliance on descriptive studies

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of unique places and regions, and to recast it as a 'spatial science' by developing generalised models of location and spatial organisation. Many such models were based on the assumptions of neo-classical economics (private enterprise, perfect competition, profit maximisation, rational actors) but were nonetheless touted as a quasi-universal science of space. (Doreen had been an early antagonist of these ideas, as the author of an influential critique of industrial location theory in 1973.³) At times it appeared that what was being proposed was a theory in which 'space' had an independent existence and an autonomous capacity to influence social outcomes. Such 'spatial fetishism' got short shrift from Doreen, and from many other thinkers, drawing inspiration from a range of social-theoretic traditions, including Marxism. As Doreen put it in *For Space*, 'abstract spatial form in itself can guarantee nothing about the social, political or ethical content of the relations that construct that form (p101)'.

Wariness of spatial fetishism had led some to argue that the analytical focus should be squarely on the social content, with the spatial patterning of social phenomena seen as a second order concern - as the outcome of social processes whose fundamental workings needed to be understood in social terms without reference to their geographies. Doreen, in contrast, insisted on the central importance of space and geography. Abstract spatial form might 'guarantee nothing', but, as the title of a book she co-edited famously put it, geography matters!⁴ Society is not determined by its spatial forms, but neither is space merely incidental. The social and the spatial are inseparable, 'an impossible dichotomy':

The fact that processes take place over space, the facts of distance or closeness, of geographical variation between areas, of the individual character of and meaning of specific places and regions - all these are essential to the operation of social processes themselves. Just as there are no purely spatial processes, neither are there any non-spatial processes. Nothing much happens, bar angels dancing, on the head of a pin.⁵

Today this view is widely, though not universally accepted. It is accepted not only by geographers, but more broadly across many fields of knowledge, following what some have described as a 'spatial turn' in the social sciences and humanities during the 1990s and 2000s. Doreen and her ideas were central to that turn and

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it is striking how often references to her work now crop up in a wide variety of disciplines, from art history to psychology.

My next encounter with Doreen came in 1987, when, as a final year undergraduate, I applied to the Open University for a place, and funding, to do a PhD on how the British labour movement was responding to political-economic restructuring. 'Restructuring' was a somewhat euphemistic term for the wholesale changes that were sweeping the British economy in the 1980s, driven partly by global shifts in the international division of labour and partly by the neoliberal and anti-trade union policies of the Thatcher governments. Deindustrialisation, growth in service employment, de-skilling and a rise in 'flexible' working were hitting trade unions hard, along with the economies and residents of their geographical heartlands in the so-called 'old industrial regions'. I wanted to find out how the labour movement was responding positively to the changes, rather than merely being worn down by them.

Doreen was one of the few geographers I'd ever come across who had written about trade unions;⁶ and, as a member of the Greater London Enterprise Board during Ken Livingstone's leadership of the Greater London Council (before its abolition by the Thatcher government in 1986), she had been closely involved in seeking to promote 'restructuring for labour'. I was thrilled when she enthusiastically agreed to supervise my research, alongside her colleague and long-time collaborator, John Allen, and proved to be a truly inspirational teacher. Supervision meetings with Doreen were always real intellectual engagements: ideas-based, challenging, thought-provoking and sometimes scary. She was hugely supportive, but could also be very critical, especially of anything that smacked of sloppy thinking or lazy shortcuts. In such cases she rarely told you were wrong, but instead would ask you in all innocence to explain your thinking - as if it was possible you had discovered some new, but as yet unclear, theoretical principle of which she was unaware. The process of having to explain your working to Doreen, thereby revealing the flaws in your argument without her needing to point them out explicitly, was often painful, but educationally very effective. Her concern with clarity and rigour extended to textual and stylistic corrections too. Doreen's obsession with correct punctuation was legendary; she put it down to her mother's exceptional skills as a secretary. She also had an extraordinary ability to explain complex ideas - in her writing, speaking and teaching. It is, for example, because of Doreen that I understand at least a little

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of how Althusser's concept of over-determination need not lead to the arid, closed structuralism of which some accused him, but can be a way of thinking about multiple possibilities and how the world could be otherwise.

Somewhat unusually, Doreen cited Althusser as one of the sources of her feminism, and as leading her to an anti-essentialist understanding of gender.⁷ Although she was active in feminist politics from the late 1960s she did not incorporate feminism as a theoretical resource into her geographical work until later in her career.⁸ Unlike a lot of work within feminist geography, gender was not the primary focus of Doreen's scholarship, and she confessed to being unsure of 'how to get a purchase on it intellectually'.⁹ She said that it was only later, once wider debates got going about the construction of identity, that she began to develop strong connections between her theoretical work and her feminist politics. Feminism, she insisted, should inform everything, not just our understanding of gender.¹⁰

Clarity and theoretical rigour were hallmarks of her thinking - she described using her brain as 'one of my greatest, almost physical, pleasures'.¹¹ But Doreen had no time for pure theory devoid of political purpose. As her involvement with the Greater London Council showed, she sought opportunities for meaningful political engagement wherever she could, connecting them always to ideas about space, place and geography. From the coalfields of the UK in the 1984-5 miners' strike, to the cities of her beloved Latin America, and most recently to the Occupy protests in the heart of London, Doreen's politics exemplified one of her own best known phrases: she really did have 'a global sense of place'.¹² She was delighted when the Bolivarian government in Venezuela took up her concept of 'power geometries' in its efforts to combat spatial inequalities and build new political organisations, such as communal councils in areas of informal housing.¹³ The term 'power geometries' expresses the idea that places are always interconnected, but in highly unequal ways, and that they have no essence, but are rather the product of a multiplicity of entwined migrations, pathways and stories.¹⁴ In much commentary on Doreen's work she is lauded for promoting a 'relational' understanding of place, and rightly so. However, by itself the term 'relational' says little. To say that places are related to each other is true, but banal. To say that places are formed through their relationships gets us a little further. But Doreen's real contribution was to think through much more rigorously the quality, character and meaning of the relations that produce places, and their

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political implications. Whether she was teasing out the spatial implications of a philosophical text, analysing the changing geographies of employment, studying the impact of globalisation on London, or working with creative artists, politics was always a primary concern.

Moreover, for Doreen politics and ethics were closely connected - both to each other and to geography. In her writings on 'responsibility' she argued that, in a highly unequal world, a relational understanding of place raised vital questions about our responsibilities to others who are distant from us in space and time. In an essay on 'Geographies of responsibility', Doreen took issue with a tendency (especially on the left) towards the 'exoneration of the local', in which local problems are blamed on external 'global' forces, 'local place' is always positively valued, and globalisation (valued negatively) is always produced elsewhere.¹⁵ Doreen pointed out that some local places are very powerful (her example was London) and are the generators and beneficiaries of globalisation (London again), even if those benefits are unevenly distributed within the place. The accrual of wealth and power in London (albeit unequally) has come about in large part as a result of London's relations with places elsewhere, and often at the expense of those places and their people. This, Doreen argued, gives rise to responsibilities for the relations on which the privileges of some places depend. However, places are not straightforwardly political actors or unified collectivities. Places are internally heterogeneous and unequal. This of course means that there are also local responsibilities, but Doreen insisted that those should not trump responsibilities to 'the stranger without'.

Although she was born in Manchester, supported Liverpool FC and loved walking in the hills of northern England, Doreen lived in London for most of her life - in Kilburn to be precise - and found in the city an endless source of fascination, ideas, connections, possibilities and frustrations. It formed the subject of her last major book, *World City*, which offers a scintillating account of London informed by the whole range of her signature concepts.¹⁶ In it Doreen makes the case for a 'politics of place beyond place' - a politics framed not in terms of localism nor of the local versus the global, but one that recognises the complex entanglements of the local and global and of place here with local places elsewhere.

As part of the celebrations of Doreen's work that marked her retirement from the Open University, David Featherstone and I were invited to edit a collection of essays.¹⁷ For the final chapter of the book we interviewed Doreen in her tiny flat in

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Kilburn. Punctuated by her glorious laugh, the conversation ranged over her life, theoretical influences, intellectual passions and political engagements - and some of the above reflections are drawn from this. Knowing that she would hate a traditional 'Festschrift', we wanted - and received - contributions that not only reflected on her work, ideas and politics but also set out suggestions for how to take them forward. It was no surprise to anyone who knew her that Doreen remained academically and political active in 'retirement' and David and I envisaged (and certainly hoped) that she would be around to take them forward herself for many years to come. It was not to be. We miss her hugely, but while we mourn her passing, we can take inspiration and hope from the breadth and depth of her work and its influence, the originality of her thought, and the sincerity and strength of her political commitment.

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Notes

1. D. Massey, *Spatial divisions of labour: social structures and the geography of production*, Macmillan 1984.
2. D. Massey and A. Catalano, *Capital and land: landownership by capital in Great Britain*, Edward Arnold 1978; D. Massey and R. Meegan, *The anatomy of job loss: the how, why and where of employment decline*, Methuen 1982.
3. D. Massey, 'Towards a critique of industrial location theory', *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 5 (3) 1973.
4. D. Massey and J. Allen, *Geography matters! A reader*, Cambridge University Press 1984.
5. *Spatial divisions of labour*, p51.
6. D. Massey and N. Miles, 'Mapping out the unions', *Marxism Today*, May 1984.

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7. D. Featherstone and J. Painter (eds), *Spatial politics: essays for Doreen Massey*, Wiley-Blackwell 2013, p254.
8. T. Freytag and M. Hoyler, "‘I feel as if I have been able to reinvent myself’ - a biographical interview with Doreen Massey’, in *Power-geometries and the politics of space-time (Hettner Lecture 1998)*, Department of Geography, University of Heidelberg 1999, p87.
9. ‘I feel as if I have been able to reinvent myself’, p87.
10. *Spatial politics: essays for Doreen Massey*, p258.
11. ‘I feel as if I have been able to reinvent myself’, p83.
12. D. Massey, ‘A global sense of place’, *Marxism Today*, June 1991.
13. *Spatial politics*, p262.
14. A. Saldhana, ‘Power-geometry as philosophy of space’ in *Spatial politics*.
15. D. Massey, ‘Geographies of responsibility’ *Geografiska Annaler* 86 B (1) 2004.
16. D. Massey, *World city*, Polity Press 2007.
17. This was *Spatial politics* - for full reference see note 7.