

----- Original Message -----
Subject: "Regional Urbanization, Spatial Justice, and Place"
Date: Thu, 04 Oct 2012 00:10:09 -0700
From: Elvin Wyly <elvin.wyly@geog.ubc.ca>
To: Deborah Martin <DeMartin@clarku.edu>

3 October 2012
Deb,

I'm getting ready for my lecture on metropolitan community in Urban Studies 200 tomorrow, and sat down to read your article, "Regional Urbanization, Spatial Justice, and Place." So I thought I'd write out a few of my thoughts.

It's powerful and eloquent. I love the discussion you describe in comparing synekism and Childe. There are important theoretical, practical, and strategic possibilities in what you describe, when "students enjoy the suggestion that people engage in face-to-face interaction as a basis for life experience, innovation, and expression."

This year, I went to all of the first meetings of discussion sections for the class -- a fairly uncommon practice here. It was delightful, and I really enjoyed the conversations with eight separate discussion sections, about twenty brilliant and hardworking students in each (although it was the first week, and we had such beautiful sun in September, so usually it was only eight or ten colleagues who made it. But the discussion was great for those who were there.) One of the things I talked about in the first week was how fast technologies are changing, and how public universities may find it harder to get taxpayers to pay for an actual location for us -- when consumers and legislators these days are expecting more and more things to be available online, iTunes University, and all the rest.

The point I tried to make my students was just like what you're saying: while it lasts, let's take advantage of the powerful role of face-to-face interaction as a basis for life experience, innovation, and expression. If it's just information delivery, then of course online will always win. But if it's to be life experience, innovation, and expression, then it has to be face to face -- talking with the students face to face in smaller sections of a large lecture class really helps me think through things in new and insightful ways. As one example, talking with the students about turnitin.com helped me to formulate principles for something I've felt strongly about in teaching lately. For several years now I've been horrified at the growth of turnitin.com -- because a private company is being used to tell students that we don't trust them. Several students' perceptive comments, in fact, helped me develop what I think is a coherent pedagogical theory for why

the practice is fundamentally, structurally changing the way knowledge is produced. But that's another story. I'm going off on a tangent again.

So, back to your 'Regional Urbanization' article. Your quote -- "students enjoy the suggestion that people engage in face-to-face interactions as a basis for life experience, innovation, and expression" -- really summarizes that experience I had in the last several weeks, talking with my students. The new short motto I've given them is this: "Cities are based on trust. So is this class."

The other valuable contribution of your piece is an extraordinarily powerful and concise way of explaining how community in the giant metropolis of the twenty-first century "has become diffuse and fractured," -- and how we can understand things better if we're careful with words like "space" and "place." This makes the point so forcefully:

"I do not think that people experience space in any way that they would articulate or conceptualize to themselves, and that includes we academics too. Rather, we experience rain on our faces or cherry blossoms in the air or we smell traffic or urine on the street. But we also experience the processes of urbanization that are spatial, such as the ones of flexible restructuring and accumulation, globalization, and hyper-simulations..."

This is a nice echo of the conceptual device Barbara Phillips uses in "City Lights" to separate "acquaintance with" urban life (subjective, situated experience) as opposed to "knowledge about" urban life (detached, objective, positivist).

But you tie space and place together in this eloquent paragraph with the best of them. It's brilliant on the level of Doreen Massey or Ed Soja.

A valuable and insightful analysis, and an effective case for "a regional urbanization in places"..."a spatial justice ... that engages beyond distributions and processes, to productions; to place-making, in all its complex and multi-faceted dimensions."

Brilliant!

best,
Elvin

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