

# Place and power critically cultural studies essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

DANIEL BROWNLEE Students MUST submit this form with coursework and complete all details in Section 1 School of City and Regional Planning COURSEWORK REPORT (Not to be used for presentation coursework) Section 1 (to be completed by student)

**Student Number:**

1107645

**Module Code and Title:**

CP0221 CULTURE, SPACE AND PLACE

**Title of Degree Course:**

GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING

**Year:**

2

**Coursework Title:**

" HOW GEOGRAPHERS STUDY CULTURE LARGELY DEPENDS ON HOW THEY UNDERSTAND THE TERMS ' CULTURE', ' PLACE' AND ' POWER'." CRITICALLY DISCUSS THIS STATEMENT USING EXAMPLES.

**Date Due:**

**(by 3. 30pm on)**

22. 3. 13

**Date in:****Module Leader:**

DR JON ANDERSON Section 2 (FOR STAFF USE ONLY - complete all or part depending on the nature of the coursework) ASSESSOR'S COMMENTS

**MARK AWARDED:**

A) SUBSTANCE B) STRUCTURE C) STYLE AND PRESENTATION D) REFERENCING E) KEY AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

**TO BE HANDED BACK WITH COURSEWORK; COPY TO STUDENT FILE**

**" How geographers study culture largely depends on how they understand the terms ' culture', ' place' and ' power' ". Critically discuss this statement using examples.**

Culture has been interpreted in many different ways over the years due to its diverse or ' polyvocal' nature (Shurmer-Smith 2002). This and the difficulty in defining culture have meant that the understanding of the terms culture, place and power is influential in how geographers study this subject.'

' Traditional' cultural geography first appeared in the 1920s and Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School were the forerunners. Sauer challenged the common belief or doxa of environmental determinism and took intellectual insight from anthropology to establish a new interpretation of culture (Anderson 2010). This interpretation was illustrated in Carl Sauer's The Morphology of Landscape (1925) and stated that " environmental determinism had pretty much got it backwards" (Mitchell 2000, p. 21).

Culture was the agent creating cultural landscapes, with nature as the medium (Sauer 1963, p. 343). Sauer (1963) argued that culture and history

were intertwined in landscape and over time the cultural landscape becomes increasingly complex. At every introduction of a different culture, the cultural landscape then becomes rejuvenated and a palimpsest is created, where a new landscape is superimposed on a previous one (Sauer 1963, p. 343).

Pieces of cultural landscapes that remain are therefore given cultural value. For instance, Rome still culturally values architecture from Ancient Rome, such as the Coliseum. This era of cultural geography also stressed the importance of description and highlighting outcomes not analysing means and processes (Anderson 2010). Then in the 1980s cultural geographers turned away from 'traditional' cultural geography as it was overly empirical, had no theoretical sense of what culture actually was and the 'unexpected black box' (Sauer 1963) of culture was not yet opened. Instead geographers turned towards humanism, feminism, social and cultural theory, and 'post' theories for inspiration (Anderson 2010). These paradigms stimulated the Cultural Turn and how culture was understood in this 'New' or representational geography. Culture was no longer interpreted with Sauer's superorganic notions and culture was now seen as a process of human practice. In this interpretation, the study of culture was a dynamic mix of what people make, how they make it, and the effects its products have (Anderson and Gale 1999). Representational cultural geography also had a different approach to material manifestations of culture than Sauer. Culture was now seen through symbols and their significance, and there was a focus on the role these play in the constitution of 'reality' and 'knowledge of reality' (Barnett 1998, p. 380). Cultural products were seen to have meanings attached by social groups; they became material objects embodying a feeling or a meaning. For example, the statue of liberty is seen

as a symbol of American hope and freedom. This is known as culture as 'text' and was a way of approaching landscape in representational cultural geography. Aitken (in Flowerdew and Martin 1997, p. 198) argues that these 'texts' are read every day; they tell us how to behave, where to smoke and when to walk. Cultural geographers therefore study the meanings of these 'texts'; theorise about the meanings attached to them, the politics underpinning them, and how they were (re)produced. Cosgrove and Jackson (1987) argue that this theorising about landscapes as 'texts' leads inevitably towards an understanding of culture that is more interpretive than morphological. Representational cultural geography, however, is met with critique which can be categorised into two parts: theories and 'things'. Price and Lewis (1993) and Duncan (1980) argue that representational geography has become preoccupied with theories. They claim that the new theoretical vocabulary has led to geographers living in their own 'wordy world' (Thrift 1996) and have therefore distanced themselves with a loss of an understanding of the practical matters in the real world. 'Things' are also said to have been overemphasized. Greenhough (2004) argues that there has been an unnecessary fascination with the language of the word and with the politics and practice of representation. Thus representational geography "silence[s] other languages and intelligences we use to engage with the world" (Anderson 2010, p. 31). This critique has inevitably led to a 'more than representational' or a 'non-representational' approach to the field. Simpson (2010) argues that it is important to note that non-representational theory is not in fact an actual theory, but a style of thinking which values experiences, feelings and practice which is beyond or before representation (Thrift 2000). It is therefore best thought in the plural as non-

representational theories (Lorimer 2008). This plurality is seen in the experimental nature of the approach. For instance, cultural geographers have explored dance (McCormack 2003), musical performances (Wood and Smith 2004), engagements with nature (Szersynski et al. 2003), sensory effects (Rodaway 1994), and artistic expression (Kaye 2000). This approach is motivated by the attitude of 'let us try it!' (Nietzsche 1974) rather than 'let us judge it' (Deleuze 1997), thus providing an open-ended perspective on the world. However, as Thrift (2004) stresses, representation is still partial but does not incorporate all of cultural life. This highlights the problem with non-representational cultural geography. It assumes that you can escape the world of representation. Yet, whenever the language of the world is mentioned, concepts of representation are present and therefore it is impossible to apply non-representational theory to culture without representation, they both go hand in hand. We cannot "represent that which lies beyond the scope of representation" (Davidson et al. 2005, p. 11). Place is crucial to the understanding of culture, as Anderson (2010) highlights, "Cultural life does not take place in a vacuum" and "if space is where culture is lived, then place is a result of their union" (Lippard 1997, p. 10). Culture takes and makes place. It changes, transforms and fashions what that place is like and how we think about it. Therefore, through understanding place we develop a viewpoint on culture. In understanding place it is crucial to understand the concept of traces. According to Anderson (2010, p. 5), "Traces are marks, residues or remnants left in place by cultural life". They therefore bond cultures and places together, influencing the identity of both. Traces can be both material and non-material, and the on-going composition of these cultural traces or the locale (Agnew and Duncan 1989) is part of

what constitutes place. In everyday actions, traces are made that take and make place. As traces interlink, cultural orders and geographical borders are created which define and control the identity of place (Anderson 2010). This (b)ordering of place means that every trace, cultural act or cultural group is seen as either 'in place' or 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996). This leads cultural geographers to study if and why that cultural group or act is 'in place' or 'out of place'. For example, in 2010 three young men were accused of performing jihad terrorist training in a park in Blackburn (Mirror 2010). This act was deemed to be 'out of place'; however, children running around a park is seen as 'in place'. This interpretation of place creates the right and proper, whilst also creating the discrepant, and deviant for certain cultural groups. Moreover, it means that places can be divided and segregated, or related and united (Anderson 2010). Cultural geographers see these orders and borders as providing an identity, a perception of whom and where we are and more significantly gives us a sense of place (Agnew and Duncan 1989) or a sense of belonging. However, places and therefore sense of belonging are not always fixed and can also be seen as dynamic and evolving. This is because traces can combine from distant and local places, as well as from the past and present, where borders are crossed and orders change. This means that places are perceived as changing on-going arrangements of cultural traces that are "never stabilised, normalised, sedimented or structured" (Rose 2002, p. 385). Consequently, Anderson (2010) argues that, places are not 'nouns', not fixed solid things but 'verbs', they are doings, and are continuously active. The relationship between place and globalisation illustrates this idea. If place is seen in a postmodern view as a process, then globalisation is natural and is just another agent that has

<https://assignbuster.com/place-and-power-critically-cultural-studies-essay/>

changed place and sense of belonging, however, if place is seen as fixed, then diversity and globalisation are a threat as place and sense of belonging are seen to be changing. It is clearly apparent how vital place is to culture. In taking and making place various cultural groups generate a range of traces that have the effect of arranging, managing, shaping, and transforming places in accordance with their belief agendas and political values (Anderson 2010). As Maxey (1999, p. 201) writes, the cultural world " is produced through the acts each of us engages with every day. Everything we do, every thought we have, contributes to the production of the social world." All these acts are a demonstration of power. Simplistically, therefore, power can be defined as the ability to act. As a consequence everyone has a certain level of power; we can all leave traces in places. Traditionally, however, power has been more than simply the power to act; it is the power to influence others, to alter what they do and where they do them (Weber 1994, Marx 2003). To exercise power in this sense, you can alter culture and transform places; you have the ' transformative capacity' (Foucault 1980, 1984). Cresswell (2000) argues that this ' transformative capacity' is the ability to change the traces of others with the intention to achieve premeditated objectives. We all have a degree of power, nevertheless the power to transform how we think and act, and thus the power to create culture and place, has the overriding significance and not all of us have this. In every act that is made by a single person or a group there are always geographical implications (Anderson 2010). Orders are created, borders are put in place and traces are made. " Space is...the stuff of power" (Thrift 2000, p. 274) and it is only with geography and the taking and making of place, that power becomes noticeable, is exercised and has consequences. Power is therefore at the

<https://assignbuster.com/place-and-power-critically-cultural-studies-essay/>



base of cultural geography, creating, stabilising and destroying orders and borders. The fight over space is consequently a result of cultural battles and space is also the vehicle of these battles. Geographers by studying place can interpret power struggles and recognise who has the power to transform place and thus culture as well (Thrift 2000). Therefore, power can exist as a dyad of domination and resistance. The groups that do have this power are said to have the 'dominating power' and the ones that don't, have the 'resisting power' (Sharp et al. 2000). A dominating power attempts to control or force others. It can be material, symbolic or psychological and is articulated through social, economic, political and cultural relations and institutions, such as, patriarchy, racism and homophobia (Sharp et al. 2000). This dominating power engenders inequality and affirms the interests of a particular culture at the expense of others to produce a leading or hegemonic cultural doxa. It can legitimize the cultural world, with the power to define or the power to represent common sense. For instance, the dominating power defines the name of new buildings or what new nations should be called. This process of domination by one cultural group over another can also be called colonisation (Fenster and Yiftachel 1997). External colonisation is when a foreign or invading state is the hegemonic power. For example, the British imposed their cultural doxa on aboriginals in Australia. Internal colonisation is the conflict between a state and a marginal culture within a nation. For instance, homeless people are seen as out of place at central station in New York (Cresswell 1996). Conversely, power can also be interpreted as resisting power. This is the intentional seeking to oppose, challenge and dispute acts of domination (Anderson 2010, p. 60). Resisting power looks to change the traces of the dominating powers and destroy the

<https://assignbuster.com/place-and-power-critically-cultural-studies-essay/>

cultural orthodoxy. On a small scale, examples would be not stopping at a red light or littering in public, both can be seen as purposefully violating cultural (b) orders. Resisting power can also be on a large scale. The hegemonic value and meanings of place can be undermined and tested by resisting groups taking and making place through rallies, demonstrations or revolutions. For instance, the anti-capitalist protesters used the space outside St. Paul's cathedral for their Occupy London camp, altering the use and meaning of this place to resist the dominating power of capitalism (BBC 2012). The black panthers salute at the 1968 Olympics by Tommie Smith and John Carlos was an act of oppressed African American resisting power against the dominating power of racism (Adams 2008). This example showed how the hegemonic use and meaning of the podium space was challenged. The ideals behind the dyad of resisting and dominating power are not always consistent. Dominating groups might not always react to intentional transgressive activity and may allow resistance to take and make place by unorthodox means. This activity is known as 'carnavalesque' (Cresswell 1996). This is the temporal suspension, both ideal and real of the conventional (b)orders of cultural society (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). On one side, Anderson (2010) argues that it is a mechanism that allows for a temporary letting off of steam that means that the hegemonic doxa and (b)orders are not fully challenged in the future. On the other hand Shields (1991) argues, this strategy can be much more. It can provide the presentation of an alternative idealistic social arrangement, which may lead to further transgressive traces and a much bigger issue. In conclusion, culture has been interpreted in many different ways over the years through approaches of 'traditional', representational, non-representational and both

representational and non-representation together. Place through ideas about traces, sense of belonging and (b)ordering provides different perspectives on culture. Finally, how geographers interpret power, either through the dyad of domination and resistance, as having the transformative capacity or as colonisation influences how they study culture.