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Culture and Space  
Spring 2003:

This narrative will describe my “Culture and Space” class that I am designing for spring 2003. I will describe both the material I’d like to use, and the way in which I’d like the course to unfold.

This course will explore the various ways in which cultures invest spaces with meanings, negotiate these meanings, and then make them the foundation for other social and cultural processes. In the human geography and related literatures this process is described as the way ‘space’ is transformed into ‘place.’

I can say that I’ve changed the course plan as a result of my participation in the Piedmont Workshop. I intend to incorporate more material on urban spaces and the unique challenges posed to culture by the rising importance of global cities. I was much inspired by Howie Frumpkin’s integrative analysis of urban Atlanta. His approach was holistic in the best tradition of cultural anthropology and I’d like to see how this technique works in studying similar environments in other parts of the world (particularly Latin America).

I will also be having students consider the idea and practice of sustainability in cross-cultural contexts. After Peggy Barlett’s talk on sustainability I was encouraged to change the course design to explicitly incorporate social justice issues. Students will consider whether practices of sustainability travel well as environmentalism becomes a dominant paradigm among governmental, nongovernmental, and civil society actors in their engagement with non-Western cultures.

More specifically, students will begin by reading theoretical works on ‘space and place’ from anthropology, geography, and environmental studies. Next they will consider how understandings of the space-place process differ depending on epistemological and disciplinary orientation. In the class I will emphasize the importance of taking what can be called a ‘humanistic’ approach to space. Nevertheless, we will also consider the following: traditional structural or economic approaches to space; the commercialization of the human environment; regionalism, community, and human settlements; experiential aspects of space; and some interesting materials on ‘landscapes of memory.’

Next we will turn to non-Western cultures to consider the theoretical issues cross-culturally. We will focus on international development because this work often involves a clash of approaches to the space-place process, as well as important power differentials between the various participants in these engagements. In addition to material from selective world areas, I will draw on my own research in Bolivia—through readings and presentation of ethnographic data—so that students can consider what happens to indigenous social spaces in the face of NGO pressure to transform space to comply with the demands of modernization. We will also incorporate theoretical material in this section to complement the case studies, in particular works drawn from the critical development literature.

In terms of process, I was inspired by the theory-practice learning discussions at the Workshop. Students in this class will design and carry out a practice-oriented project somewhere in the Atlanta area. I do not want to restrict the types of projects, but students will have to do something that involves both an intellectual understanding of space-place complexity, as well as the importance of sustainability as a practical problem to be solved. Again, based on Howie Frumpkin’s presentation, there are many important projects to be done based on the racialization of space, and the way that the urban space-place dynamic here in Atlanta reflects patterns of socioeconomic inequality.