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SPACE, MOBILITY, AND INTERACTION

Robin James Smith

Interactionist¹ sociology has, in different waves, emphasised the importance of locating the social actor and action in their physical, spatial, and, more recently, mobile world. This chapter traces something of that tradition, from its roots in phenomenological and pragmatist philosophy, to more recent empirical research. It outlines three general treatments of space and mobility in Interactionist work: interactions and relations as taking place *within* space, the relationship of space and social settings to the Self and social organisation, and, finally, work that aims to describe space as accomplished and managed *in motion*. The chapter aims to demonstrate how:

- Space and mobility are not to be reduced to a background "context" of interaction, but form conditions and resources for doing interaction
- Space and mobility are contingent factors in any given interaction, managed by the participants, in particular ways that characterise that interaction
- Space and mobility are made sense of, organised, and accomplished as *social* orders through practical methods in particular ways, in particular contexts.

SOCIAL ORGANISATION, SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND INTERACTIONISM

The development of the Interactionist tradition was grounded, historically and conceptually, in the movements of people and the changing organisation of space in rapidly expanding industrial conurbations. An abiding concern for the formative sociology developed in Chicago was the impact of social change upon individuals, groups and communities, and the ties that were understood to hold them together (e.g. Wirth, 1938). This history is dealt with elsewhere (link to chapter(s), this collection?), but it is worth briefly restating in order to emphasise how the shifting spatiality, formed in and through the increased fluidity of social relations, formed a primary aspect of the work of the Chicago School. In the opening pages of *The City*, for instance, Robert Park (1925: 8) observed that:

¹ Taken here to be a broad church, which includes studies of interaction from an ethnomethodological or conversation analytic orientation (see chapter XX this collection; also Dennis, 2011).

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“... human geography has been profoundly modified by human invention... under these circumstances the concept of position, of distance, and of mobility have come to have a new significance. Mobility is important as a sociological concept only in so far as it ensures new social contact, and physical distance is significant for social relations only when it is possible to interpret it in terms of social distance. ”

Note that Park's concern is not movement and space *per se* but how mobility is relevant for social relations and interaction. The orientation to the 'natural' organisation of urban space, and movements within and between different 'zones' of the city, was, of course, further explored in the "Chicago ethnographies" (e.g. Zorbaugh's (1926) research on the "natural" production of distinct areas in the city and cultural segregation). In addition to new forms of spatial organisation, the public realm increasingly comprised a shifting population of individuals who, to differing degrees, did not personally know one another, but nonetheless had to negotiate a fluid and fleeting series of encounters. As Lofland has it (1973), whatever might be said of the city, one of the fundamental aspects of urban life is that it is experienced as a "world of strangers".

This "problem of strangers" formed a site of intellectual encounter between the empirical programme of the Chicago ethnographers, the sociology of Georg Simmel, and Pragmatist philosophy, particularly that of George Herbert Mead. Simmel's (1908[1950]) writings on the impact of urban living upon the mental processes of individuals (who adopt an increasingly blasé attitude toward their surroundings and fellow citizens) are well-known, as are the essays on "The Stranger" and "The Sociology of the Senses". A key contribution of Simmel's (1908[1950]: 402) work, among many, is the notion – the influence of which can be seen in Park's position above – that spatial relations are "only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations". As such, changing conditions and practices of mobility demand different relations between co-present others in terms of the gaze and visual contact (Jensen, 2006).

George Herbert Mead's writings on space and time developed a critical engagement with the philosophy of Bergson and Whitehead, among others. Mead shared a processual view of reality – and, of course, of mind, self, and society – yet rejected the dualism at the heart of the

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Bergsonian treatment which led to a differential status for space and time. Indeed, despite the appeal for this chapter of the oft-cited Bergsonian (2007: 22) quote "movement is reality itself", the fuller quote goes on to position intellect as starting out from serial immobilities, which are assembled to give the impression of movement, with movement being related, instead, to intuition. For Bergson, then, space is treated as external and abstract, and time, and *duré*, are seen to be closer to reality. Mead's critique drew from his engagement with the theory of relativity and the conceptualisation of *space-time*. Importantly, for Mead, absolute space-time was to be treated as a scientific construct and, instead, it is necessary to recognise how referents to 'space' and 'time' have meaning within a specific reference system and corresponding objective present (Mead, 1969; also, Brogaard, 1999). From this, Mead develops a discussion of the development of intelligence and the constitution of experience in the act. The social significance of an object is realised in "contact" and "distance" relations within a specific spatialised present, through a "distance stimulus" leading to contact or avoidance. In contact, the "hand fashions the physical or perceptual thing" and it is in this way that, "Physical things are perceptual things. They also arise within the act" (p.394).

These early inspirations for the serious treatment of space and mobility as relational aspects of social experience have a legacy – although often an unstated one – in various elements of core Interactionist theory and research. Erving Goffman's sociology, for example, was centrally concerned with the rules and structures and rituals of face-to-face encounter in social settings. Across his writings, space, distance, and mobility are abiding themes, and I return to these below. At the same time, a range of related and commensurate studies were conducted including the development of proxemics (Hall, 1966) and the environmental psychology of Wright and Barker (1956).²

Other approaches, most notably Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, drew on a (deliberate mis-)reading of phenomenological philosophy in attending to and describing how space and movement are *embodied and accomplished* as part of the phenomenal field, rather than abstract or "structural", properties of the life-world. Husserl's phenomenology provided for objects as apprehendable in terms of their relation to a "background" of different scales, not immediately

² There has also been a continued place for space and mobility, in ambivalent and transgressive registers, in the development and practice of anthropology sensitive to everyday interaction, a discipline which was itself "founded on spatial migration" (Atkinson et al, 2008: 143-178).

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available, from which the object "detaches itself". Indeed, a common thread across the various iterations of the phenomenological attitude toward space and mobility is an attention to the reflexive organisation of experience in terms of "categories of acquaintance and strangeness" (see Schutz, 1966: 10) in which the "sharing of space and time" forms a key component of the intersubjective life-world in terms of "reach" (p. 118-119). This is further developed in Merleau-Ponty's (1962[2000]) philosophy of embodiment and experience and, specifically, his distinction of *a spatiality of situation* in which "bodily space can be distinguished from external space and envelop its parts instead of spreading them out, because it is the darkness needed in the theatre to show up the performance..." (p. 100). For Merleau-Ponty; "We must therefore avoid saying that our body is *in* space or *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time" (p. 139). *Inhabiting* space and time, proposes an alternative view that sees the body and experience, space and time, and motion as intertwined, relational, and as mutually constitutive orders. In this sense, the question becomes not one of simply locating bodies in space and time, but of exploring the practices through which space and mobility are ongoingly accomplished. Space is also, of course, accomplished in and through language, and spatial categories are found in use in the accomplishment of many activities – telling a story being a prime example (Sacks, 1986) – although there is not room for a discussion here.

In sum, the contribution of Interactionist theory and research to the understanding of space and mobility can be organised in to three key elements. The first is that all interactions happen somewhere, and they all take place – even when mediated by technology – in actual settings consisting of material, spatial, and motile resources. The second contribution is a direct relation of the classic tenets of interactionism, in that the meaning of any given social setting or place is produced and modified in joint interaction, and will be acted toward in relation to that meaning. The third, is that social settings are ongoingly *accomplished* as an "interaction ecology" (see, e.g. Neville et al (2014)) as actors recruit, negotiate, adapt, and organise objects, mobility, and the materiality of settings.

SOCIAL SETTINGS, SPATIAL ARRANGEMENTS, AND TERRITORIES

The mundane world is, of course, experienced in and through our engagement with material spaces which through those engagements are made social settings. In this way, social settings are embodied and emplaced and unavoidably implicated in interaction, communication, and

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the accomplishment of meaning. As stated by Goffman (1964: 133), the "substratum of a gesture derives from the maker's body, the form of the gesture can be intimately determined by the microecological orbit in which the speaker finds himself" and, so the "immediate environment" must be introduced to the analysis of interaction "in some systematic way". With exceptions, more attention has been devoted to the actors and their actions, than to the props and scenery that they use to bring off the performance. This has produced a "not so much 'disembodied,' but 'dematerialized' understanding of conduct and action." (vom Lehn et al, 2001: 208). A number of Interactionist studies have, however, demonstrated ways to systematically and sustainedly address the co-constitutive organisation of action, space, and movement.

Social settings and a sense of place

In keeping with Blumer's key tenants, some Interactionist studies have considered how spaces are imbued with meaning and become meaningful in and through people's engagement with a given setting. Although often in unacknowledged manner, Interactionist concepts were enrolled in much of the interdisciplinary writings on place and landscape in the early 2000s. My own doctoral research described how competing framings of place in a regenerated ex-industrial waterfront – and tensions and contradictions between the 'smooth narrative' of tourism and consumption, and local histories of labour, race relations, and exclusion – were managed in 'commonsense topographies' (see also Borer, 2011). Interactionist informed urban ethnographies have described the ways in which people form attachments to place and how spatial imaginaries impact upon perceptions of Self, group and category, and place within society (e.g. Liebow, 1967[2003]; Duneier, 1999; Anderson, 2004; Duck, 2015). Vannini's ethnographic studies of engagements with landscape similarly draw out the ways in which spaces are made meaningful in and through people's mundane comings and goings as the stuff of place itself. In *Ferry Tales*, for example, Vannini (2012) vividly illustrates how a relational sense of place is developed in people's relationship to the ferry and their travel between the island and the mainland. Centering on the concept of *performance* in the constitution of place, Vannini develops an intimate description of performance as a practical engagement, and fluid metaphor for describing life lived on the move. Vannini's ethnographies demonstrate the ways in which people's doings do not just play out across cartographic space, but *are* space and place as realised in the mundane circulations of everyday life.

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Settings and spatial arrangements

In terms of the specific and systematic attention to how actions are organised with and through, rather than *in*, space, key studies include LeBaron and Streeck's (1997) description of how the "built-in equipment" of an interrogation room is enrolled by law enforcement officers in the elicitation of a confession. The work of Charles Goodwin (2007) is also particularly instructive in explicating, for example, "environmentally coupled gestures". The scoring of a touchdown, for instance, is achieved through the crossing of the body and the ball over a painted line. The action is accomplished relationally with elements of the material and semiotic surrounds. The significance is in highlighting how elements of a given setting can be differently produced, and made relevant, in and through embodied practices. Indeed, various studies have shown how participants to a scene work to accomplish the setting in a meaningful, locally relevant, way. The "built-in equipment" is used in specific, activity-relevant ways, from the building of a queue at a bus stop, to the business of getting a lecture started (Garfinkel, 2002; Eglin, 2009). Activities and categorisations (e.g. 'passenger' or 'lecturer') are thus accomplished in relation to the nameable parts of a setting or scene (Smith, 2017; forthcoming). These practices are, then, routinely used by members to establish a 'sense of place' which has to do with a sense of "belonging" played out at different scales. Whether in terms of Vannini's islander's sense of place, or in more locally organised, and fleeting senses of a bench being "your bench", taken together, the production of social settings and social spaces – as made up of various nameable elements – can be seen to be central to social organisation more generally, rather than some sub-concern thereof.

Territories and the Self

The organisation of space, territory, and movement within and between different 'regions', was more central to Goffman's sociology than is often recognised. It was, of course, explicated in terms of 'front' and 'back' regions and his work on public space, but also featured in his analysis of the Total Institution, and continued in to his latter work (e.g. (1974[1986]: 255). Goffman's conceptual typology of Total Institutions was primarily spatial, and his analysis of the asylum included remarks on "free areas" and "damp corners" where inmates might preserve a sense of Self and were a key resource for the range of "secondary adjustments" of the inmates in extremis:

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...in some wards, a few patients would carry their blankets around with them during the day and, in an act thought to be highly regressive, each would curl up on the floor with his blanket completely covering him; within this covered space each had some margin of control (Goffman (1961[1991]: 219)

In his writing on public space, Goffman (1971[2010]) develops a full typology of territories that are differently produced and implicated in the organization of social space. Some are egocentric such as "personal space", "the stall", and "use space" and all have directly to do with the organization of proximity and "ownership" of bodies and objects and surrounding spaces. In these claims and violations reside what I would call the "lived politics" of space, routinely observable in everyday life in occasions of violations of gaze or touch on, say, public transport. It is also worth noting that such violations are visible against the sustainedly "normal appearances" of public spaces; a product of the sheer effort that co-present persons go to in avoiding coming in to various kinds of contact with one another (Hirschauer, 2005).³ Claims to personal territories often involve the direct use of objects for both production and protection (the use of newspapers or, nowadays, mobile phones as "involvement shields", coats left on chairs, or beach towels on sun loungers as markers of the non-present owner's "stall"). Users of a shopping mall food-court, for example, are able to re-organised the space in terms of the arrangements of seats, the possibility of having a private conversation in such an ostensibly "public" space, and, as noted above, the sense that the customers "owned" the tables during the time that they were using them (Manzo, 2005).

Settings and territories are, then, primarily social in the sense that they are accomplished in action, which is to say that they must be actively produced and recognized as such in and through the flow activity. More recent work has developed this insight to analyse territories of different scales in urban spaces (e.g. Kärholm, 2007). Combining a sensibility toward mobilities with Goffman's original concepts, finds that claimants and counter-claimants do not so much patrol *within* a territory or *along* a boundary but, rather, territories and boundaries are *produced* through such movements (Smith and Hall, 2018).

³ It is also worth noting, as Goffman does (1971[2010]), that the "normal" maintenance of territories, particularly those that are ego-centric, provides opportunities for activities such as flirting by "breaching" the usual constraint of gaze, the kinds of casual sexual encounters described by Laud Humphreys (1975), and many other "illicit" forms of contact.

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MOVING IN TO INTERACTION AND INTERACTION ON THE MOVE

Social interaction is unavoidably spatial and mobile. Space and mobility are, in a massively and finely coordinated sense, both organised in and for interaction and form resources for the doing of social gatherings (including matters such as entry, involvement, and exit). Interactions are themselves "mobile": from the movements that bring participants in to contact in the first instance; through the micro coordination of bodily alignment and gesture in demonstrating involvement, to interactions that take place on the move (see Haddington et al, 2013) for a further elucidation of the distinction between these categories). Building upon the early attention to co-presence and sociality (Goffman, 1963), a range of studies have described how the arrangement of bodies in and through space is a necessary condition for successful interactions and, in particular, how the mutual alignment of bodies and gaze and displays of recognition and deference is finely coordinated and managed.

The work of opening a face-to-face interaction, whether between acquaintances or strangers involves "intense body activity in space, through which participants achieve their social and spatial convergence and conjunction..." (Mondada, 2009: 1977). Mundane activities, such as holding a conversation with a friend after a chance encounter on a street (see Licoppe, Forthcoming), involves a good deal of work relating to displays of initial recognition (Schiffrin, 1977), of greeting (Kendon and Ferber, 1973), and of coming in to proximity and "formation" (Kendon, 1990). Mondada (2009), in particular, has detailed the ways in which the possibility of focused interactions between strangers has a very particular mobile and spatial character in that they "take place contingently in open spaces, and involve prospective co-participants dynamically moving in and out of converging and diverging trajectories" (p.1978). An attention to these socio-spatial dynamics reveals the fine-grained, phasic, character of possibilities for encounter in public space.

Different situations demand of their participants different degrees of involvement, but a key way in which involvement is displayed, and is available to be seen by others, is through what Goffman called the "body idiom" and, elsewhere, "body glosses" in the service of producing a given common "interactional space" (Mondada, 2007). Indeed, such an attention to the orientation of the body, and the lower body in particular, has been shown to be key in coming in to, maintaining and displaying spatial-orientation as relevant for the encounter (within the "F-formation" (Kendon, 1990: 211)). Analyses of bodily movement and gesture

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demonstrate how spatial formations and orientations of participants relate to speech-rights and "taking the floor".

Finally, in considering the close and mutually constitutive relation between spatial arrangement, movement, and talk, it is important to recognise that face-to-face encounters do not simply end when a turn at talking ends. Broth and Mondada (2013; 2019) have described the rich detail of bodily movement for doing closing encounters in studies of the significance of walking away, and the delaying of walking away, as collaborative and embodied projectable activities.

In terms of the attention to methods and practices through which participants in a given mobile scene arrange and build their movements in relation to and for those of others, Goffman (1971: 40), again, provides something of a foundation. For example, the ways in which individuals are observably present in various social settings, whether static or mobile, as either a "single unit" or as part of a "with", are "the fundamental units of public life". Whilst this may appear a rather trivial observation, the possibility of the observation is central to the work of navigating through public space (e.g. Hester and Francis, 2003). Such mobile formations as "withs" are, again, reflexively constituted and are a key example of the unremarked and routine production and recognition of social, categorial, relationships that go beyond the usual categories used by sociologists. Investigating the lived detail of "mobile formations", a range of studies have built on Ryave and Schenkein's (1974) seminal study of the "artfulness" of members' practices for avoiding collision with each other and producing and managing "natural boundaries" (p. 267).

In what should be a seminal work for the development of a "minimalist" sociology of public space, Lee and Watson (1993) demonstrate how the possibility of public space is predicated upon mutually available methods for coordination and situational preferences. Reflexively constituted "rules" are not so much "followed" as *displayed*, for example, in the demonstrable preference for avoiding contact, and minimising disruption to the trajectories of others (such considerations have been thrown in to sharp relief by the physical distancing measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic). Lee and Watson (1993) studied public places in Paris and Manchester and further detail the practices that provide for the local order of mobility in public places. They note, for example, that the concerns of participants in various formations in public space – queues, for a classic example, and what they call "flow files" (lines of

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pedestrians that form up, together, to navigate a particular space, before dispersing) – are with the particular organisation of that formation and their sequential and categorial obligations within it (for example, as “next in line” in the queue, or as “leader” in the flow file). A key point is that such formations have a public, rather than “internal” significance, in that they are displays of a mobile relationship for other participants within a given scene and, as such, are relevant for the practical purposes of navigation.

The pay-off of this careful attention to these publically available practices is that “rather than categorising different types of mobilities, it becomes possible to view individuals not as mere mobile subjects but as actors who are engaged in shaping and (re)producing mobilities” (McIlvenny, 2013: xx). The business of moving together in different units and groups, or engaging in focused interactions with strangers has been studied in increasing specificity. Making use of video materials, ethnomethodological and conversation analytic influenced studies have described the practices involved in the coordination of moving together in a range of contexts and activities (e.g. Collinson, 2006; deStefani and Mondada, 2014; Weilenman et al, 2014; Tuncer et al, 2020). What these studies have demonstrated is not only the highly coordinated nature of moving and communicating together, but how each practice is embedded in and provides resources for the other within the given activity. Addressed from an Interactionist viewpoint, driving, for instance, has been reconsidered as a distributed, collaborative, activity accomplished by those in the car (Watson, 1999; Laurier, Laurier et al); and between and with other road users (Haddington and Rauniomaa, 2014; de Stefani et al, 2019).

Taking the “traffic system” more generally – and recognising that things break down, sometimes (Katz, 1999; Smith, 2017) – it is a mundane but rather miraculous organisational thing that its participants members can and do collaborate to maintain its order (Laurier, 2019). Part of the interactional work that contributes to the possibility of such systems can be observed at points where different modalities of mobility intersect, and where “the participant must trustfully put himself in to the hands of others” (Goffman, 1971: 127-128). Whilst this can rely on the provided infrastructure of a given setting, it must still be recognised, as outlined above, the meaning of, say, a traffic light or pedestrian crossing, is accomplished *in use*, and does not determine the organisation of a given setting. Indeed, as Liberman (2013) has described,

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pedestrians can do away with infrastructure entirely and are able to subvert the “traffic hierarchy” by “doing being oblivious” (toward cars) when walking in to the road, and stopping traffic, to cross the street. Such intersections form perspicuous sites for the study of the whole range of practices of communication (direct and mediated), embodied displays of projectability and trajectory, turn-taking, categorisation, “attention displays”, and so on (e.g. Lee and Watson, 1993; Smith, 2017b; Merlino and Mondada, 2019).⁴

A key significance of these studies – again drawing from various perspectives, but focussing centrally on interaction – is the critique of somewhat static, “ecological” underpinnings of traditional and formal approaches in which movement and interaction are understood to take place *within* or travel *between* bounded and defined sites and spaces. This goes some way to avoiding the dominance of Euclidean geometry in the social sciences that, still, finds actors, actions, and interaction positioned *in* space (Crabtree, 2000; see also the insights offered in the various writings of Tim Ingold (e.g. 2000)).

Such mobility practices, particularly within urban settings, both are shaped by but also constitute, in practice, the “structures” of urban space. Indeed, a number of studies have shown how even such (literally) concrete “structures” as streets and roads are fluid, dynamically organised, and constituted in use and in concert with other users (e.g. Lloyd et al, 2019). Importantly, other studies have described the interactional practices of persons with various disabilities as they move in public space including the navigational practices of those with visual impairments (Relieu, 1994; Due and Lange, 2017) and those with physical impairments using public transport (Munoz, forthcoming). Much work remains to be done in this particular area, given that alternate forms of moving in and with the built infrastructure, and their associated troubles form a perspicuous case for reflexive organisation of space and mobility.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced and outlined an interactionist approach, broadly conceived, to the social production, management, and meaning of “space”. As described below, the interactional treatment of space has been at the heart of Interactionist sociology since its inception, and, yet,

⁴ In Alex Garland’s (2014) *Ex Machina*, Ava, an advanced “AI” robot, is asked “where would you go, if you could go outside?”. Her response is “a busy pedestrian and traffic intersection in a city”. When asked why, she says “a traffic intersection would provide a concentrated but shifting view of human life”.

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"space" and "mobility" has only more recently received the warranted sustained and focused attention required. Part of this reason for this is the ubiquitous, unavoidable, and inextricable character of space and mobility in and as interactional contexts, such that these are elements (arguably along with the materiality of social settings) either overlooked entirely, or conceived of as a separate or niche concern. One of the reasons, therefore, for the rather broad and somewhat eclectic definition of "interactionist" research in this chapter, has been to draw together various perspectives concerned with interaction as a means of demonstrating the centrality of space and mobility for the ordinary society of members. The light produced by these various approaches combined is, I trust, more productive than any heat produced by friction introduced to the discussion.

Like the categorial and sequential organisation of conversation, the ongoing and reflexive constitution of space and mobility as *social* orders is both a resource and accomplishment and, in some case, constraint upon unfolding, local, conditions of possibility. The back-and-forth, chiasmatic reflexivity (Merleau-Ponty, 1962[2000]) that exists between movement, environment, and, material and interactional resources produces conditions for activities that are qualitatively different than those in a static situation. One might simply consider difference in the perception of an object or scene from a fixed position to when one is moving. What the various studies and perspectives briefly introduced here reveal and further highlight are how mobile practices – of driving, of navigating, of walking and so on – are not only coordinated in space, or even *with* space, but are *constitutive* of space as a practically organised, which is to say *socially* organised, and primarily embodied phenomenon. Mobility and space are resources for, and the context of, interaction: the very stuff of the social.

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