19. The global / local in our research
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19.1 The local and the global in spatial appropriation

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Research on spatial appropriation is at the core of human geographical studies. Regardless of the form of appropriation, this process is mostly regarded as a local activity and has, on the first glance, little to do with globalization. However, even in its strictest form of physical appropriation there is almost always a global aspect involved. In my presentation I want to in a first part address different forms of spatial appropriation, i.e. physical appropriation, mental appropriation, spatial alienation, and disappropriation and their relation to the local and the global (cf. Backhaus & Müller, 2006). In a second part I want to present a few vignettes of research projects to illustrate the close connection of the local and the global:

- The appropriation of the sea in Bali between local traditions and global markets (Backhaus, 1998).
- Domestic tourism in Malaysian national parks: global rules for local leisure time (Backhaus, 2005).
- Appropriation of public space by skaters in Zug: global sub-culture meets local opposition (Carminitana, 2009).

I want to conclude with a few remarks about methodological issues concerning research of spatial appropriation that ought to be open to both local and global processes although especially the global can be a very elusive aspect when being “in the field”.

REFERENCES

19.2

Psychosocial effects of natural (cosmic) phenomena: a case study

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Every now and then on a clear night, if you get a chance of spending a few hours out in the open, I hope you will be able to catch the faint trail of a shooting star or two. And I believe you would always like to make a wish (something we all are told while growing up) before the trailblazer vanishes into the darkness of the atmosphere. Historically these poor nocturnal adventurers (not really as they fall to earth all around the clock) have demonstrated a remarkable ability to impact people’s lives in many ways. Myths surrounding meteorites have influenced collective psychology of societies far and wide to the extent that even belief systems evolved based on either reverence or fear of a fallen meteorite. With the kind of cosmological information we have today, our understanding and attitudes have changed so much that at times we seem to ignore that even today in distant cultures, people still take meteorites as evil omens and harbingers of death and destruction. For any one interested, a good starting point can be Cosmic Debris: Meteorites in History (Burke 1986) in which the author explores human society’s often strange relationship with these natural (cosmic) phenomena.

Recently I was engaged in a small project related to identification of a meteorite debris near village Lehri (33°09'09"N; 73°33'35"E) in district Jhelum, Pakistan (Kayani 2009). This debris consists of apparently extremely weathered stones scattered on an area about 250 metres in length and 100 metres across. The site referred to as Pind or village in the local dialect Pothohari on which this debris has been discovered had been under cultivation and is filled with levelled fields (that are worked no more) and their raised boundaries. On these raised boundaries and also in the fields lie countless small pottery shards of different shapes and sizes. The largest concentration of these shards is found on the boundaries of fields, as the farmers while ploughing and clearing must have pushed them to the sides. Presence of this much quantity of broken earthenware points towards existence of a human settlement on this site that was abandoned in a rather hastily manner at some point in history. A few samples of these pottery shards were examined by late Dr. Ahmed Hassan Dani, one of Pakistan’s leading archaeologists and he in his preliminary analysis identified them from muslim era in Indian subcontinent (roughly from 12th century onwards).

Local oral history contains no mention of a village on this site. Local written history does not exist at all. The usage of the term ‘Pind’ by residents of nearby villages for this site (that would have been used to point towards a settlement in normal circumstances) provides a clue as the name has entered the referral system used locally for identification of different places and is still in use today long after the disappearance of the village it referred to. One of the oldest and largest villages in this area is Lehri (half a kilometre south of this site). Historical records indicate that this village has been inhabited since 15th century. It is probable that this site (Pind) was also occupied at the same time and a small village existed on this location. But in the first land reforms carried out by the British in 1860, this site has been recorded as being used for agricultural purposes and not as a settlement. So here we can identify a general time period from 1400-1860, during which a village that existed on this site was abandoned due to some unknown reasons.

The presence and peculiar mixing of this meteorite debris with pottery shards may help us with a reason for the sudden abandoning of the village. It seems like for the residents of this presumed settlement tragedy came from the sky. Worse if it came during a winter’s night when the dark and gloomy ravines surrounding the village site are filled with chilling north wind. Suddenly the sky would have illuminated with thousands of fireballs. The silence of the hitherto peaceful night would have been replaced with screams of horror and destruction as smouldering meteorite debris hit people’s rooftops, causing panic and probably damage to life and property. The terrible spectacle may have evoked the primeval fear of mountain people that they have been attacked by demons and the village site is cursed. The villagers relocated abandoning the site for good, leaving broken clay ware and meteorite debris as reminder of the chaos and tragedy that befell this sad and forgotten site.

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Jumping scales? dealing with the local and the global in a transnational research project

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The scales are a basic concept in geography and much geographical research would not exist without the local, the regional, the national, or the global. Many debates have centered on the usage of scales in geographical research. For instance, feminist geographers have claimed the body as a scale of social action in and about space that is nested in the local. Recently, Sally Marston, John Paul Jones and Keith Woodward claimed that scales are not only a social construction – as Sally Marston pointed out earlier – but they tried to imagine the world without looking through the scalar lens. They called this perception of the social world a “flat ontology”: a network of sites, where actions and interactions are just about to happen.

These debates seem very interesting on the theoretical level. But how can we make use of the flat ontology for our empirical work? The paper will address this question by looking first at the theoretical debates around scales and will then discuss especially the recent article by Jones, Woodward and Marston that aims to sketch an empirical usage of their flat ontology. Lastly, I will try to reflect on these thoughts from the literature by looking at my own research on second generation migrants from Spanish parents in Switzerland and their transnational social networks and their perception of transnational social spaces. Are we jumping scale as researchers when getting on an airplane in order to fly to another country, following the transnational connections of our research subjects? How can we grasp another scale than the local when meeting and interviewing people always in concrete sites?