Reinventing the Wheel of Social Geography?

Researchers in urban sociology and urban economics have long been interested in investigating the role of the spatial dimension on several outcomes. For example, many scholars focusing on the determinants of inequality have investigated the role of the spatial dimension on the intergenerational transmission of inequalities. Under different perspectives, the relationship between residential location and individual characteristics has frequently been addressed to see how these two key elements interact. Less attention has been paid, however, to the channels through which the physical space of where we live has a relevant role on how we live and with whom. This is the principal aim of this very ambitious and wide-ranging book. It is a disappointment then to see all the expectations falling apart page after page. The Space between Us: Social Geography and Politics turns out to be quite prolix, US-biased, apt to self-indulgence, and permeated by a sort of disturbing vein of white superiority. Some interesting experiments and stories from a bunch of American cities plus Jerusalem make up the best part of the 250 pages.

In the first part, Enos sets out the theoretical foundation of his work. More than theory, this proves to be an extraordinary exercise of inductivism, i.e. the research approach based on proposing a general law to generalise observed patterns. But while it is cute to recall the experience of social diversity at lake Yosemite when the author was a kid (p. 18), it becomes a bit stretched to pretend to generate ground-breaking theories with ourselves at the centre. For example, on page 51 Enos writes: ‘Despite all my best intentions as a liberal – one married to a Muslim woman, no less – that simple blue scarf turned my mind to every negative stereotype about the danger of Muslims on planes.’ (emphasis added) The paragraph continues by seemingly legitimising the racist stereotype that just because we are what we are and we are born where we are born, even people married with Muslim women may remain racist. Clearly, there are serious dangers when one derives a general pattern from a very peculiar perception of one individual.

Enos tries to demonstrate that: (i) the geographic space structures social cognition and thus our political behaviour; (ii) social geography consequently affects our behaviours and institutions; and (iii) this effect on behaviours is channelled through our perceptions. While the first two contributions seem very similar and have been extensively treated in the literature, the third one would be interesting. However, rather than abstracting from his own perceptions, Enos builds a theory based on his own perceptions and he is absolutely convincing in proving that this theory holds for him.

All the papers analysing the Moving to Opportunity project in the United States, the great work done by Robert Sampson [2004], Ray Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren [2016, 2018], among others, have created a great literature analysing the role of space for the development of inequalities, especially and at least in the United States. Many of these works have usefully deter-
mined almost causal relationships between the space where people live and their happiness, life satisfaction, labour market success, and a plethora of different outcomes. Many of these papers have been innovative, provocative, and counterintuitive. These characteristics are not obviously a requisite for a good book. However, this book’s introduction, after more than 40 pages of dozens of ‘as I will describe later’, ‘as I presented above’, ‘as I will show’ arguments and harsh critiques of previous literature (e.g. p. 49), concludes with ‘I am striving for a general argument. I want to explain the effects of space on the salience of social groups and I want to show how this affects behaviours.’ Therefore, the reader could expect something more than:

• ‘…segregation appears to improve the accuracy [in determining the connection of people and place]; where Latinos or Blacks were more segregated from whites, white people were more accurate in finding them on the map.’ (p. 85)

• ‘…the psychological space between us increases when the geographic space between us decreases.’ (p. 114)

• ‘Social geography – the space between groups – can make a real difference in our politics and can affect voting behaviour in magnitudes unrevealed by political campaigns.’ (p. 163)

In the first example, Enos asks 1909 individuals during a lab experiment to locate ethnic minorities in their own area. In the second one, over 30 people with clear immigrant traits (language mainly) spent their summer on Boston trains to investigate commuter reactions. In the last example, to make short a (very) long story, Enos analyses how white voters living close to blacks voted less for Obama in 2008. While the reader must really respect the effort, technological progress, and time spent on these questions, at the same time she might remain disappointed by the lack of novelty in the main content across these pages.

The book, in fact, for large parts, rather than providing new explanations that add value and shedding new light on existing ones, seems very much about reinventing the wheel. The comparative experiments in Boston, Chicago, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and Phoenix are interesting but frequently difficult to follow because they are too much diluted by personal biographical anecdotes and efforts to demonstrate common impressions. The methodological choice of conducting real-life experiments to confirm that the feelings of a ‘Wasp’ individual are shared by many other ‘Wasp’ individuals can be interesting, too. However, overall, the content of the book does not seem to add much to the existing literature.

The book is also ambiguous about who it is targeting. It is difficult to consider this a book for a general readership, but at the same time the academic reader is left without anything with which to evaluate the author’s research findings. There are no tables or coefficients, not even in the appendix. Even if available online with the data, not reporting a single relevant table is a major weakness of the book. Enos asks for a great deal of trust about his results. Sometimes it is difficult to grant him this, since frequently the results seem to be stretched towards the desired conclusion. To provide one example, in an analysis of Boston, a set of graphs on page 125 is supposed to demonstrate that the greater the percentage of Spanish-speaking commuters, the greater the perception of immigration is on Boston trains. However, the 95% confidence intervals seem to overlap here, and the results do not seem very robust.

On page 193 Enos writes: ‘When scholars only test one single location, it is difficult to know how representative of the country it is’. This is true without a doubt, but it is perhaps confusing to mix external validity and causality. Indeed, while comparing more cities and presenting more examples may increase external validity and
the descriptive power of the analysis, it does not have anything to do with causality. It is therefore difficult to understand why Enos, just 40 pages later, claims: ‘Establishing a causal effect of social geography has long been difficult for research on context, with selection casting doubt on many findings, but with the accumulated evidence of this book, the causal effect of social geography seems clear.’ (p. 230). Accumulated evidence unfortunately does not imply causality. To conclude, while the interesting descriptive evidence could have been summarised in one or two papers, overall this book does not advance the literature about social geography.

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References

The Spaces We Occupy and the Divides We Create

As European countries are experiencing the increasing ethnic diversification of their societies, ethnic segregation and its causes and consequences are becoming issues of concern not only at the domestic but increasingly also at the EU level. In the search to understand this complex phenomenon, Enos’s timely book provides a fresh view relevant to both scholars and policy practitioners by convincingly arguing that the spaces we occupy dramatically impact the construction of racial and ethnic divides. The book’s nine chapters develop the evidence in three steps. First, the theoretical scaffolding is built, with an elaboration of the main concepts and their interlinkages. Then the author takes the reader to laboratories, where a set of experiments disentangle the causal effects of space on attitudes and behaviours. The last step is a set of real-life experiments – real, existing situations that the researcher exploits to illustrate that the links observed in the lab experiments do exist in everyday situations and encounters.

In so proceeding, Enos makes a major contribution to the study of the impact of segregation. Many past studies, while providing important insights, suffered from a common problem: they were not able to demonstrate that the correlations they observed between segregation and socio-political outcomes were in fact evidence for causal relationships. Enos’s research strategy of relying on ingenious experiments – the gold standard in research – more convincingly proves that the way individuals are occupying and experiencing space has an impact on how they perceive others, on the biases they develop, and on how they act.

The book’s theoretical foundations build on social sciences and psychology theories. The starting point is the argument that we humans are hard-wired to classify ourselves by group membership. In the process, attributing positive characteristics to some groups (‘us’) and negative characteristics to other groups (‘them’) maintains group classifications and builds group identities. Humans use space as a heuristic device to make decisions about the individuals (and groups) inhabiting certain areas. However, Enos argues, it is not simply ‘space’, but rather how people occupy space that matters (size, proximity, and the degree of segregation) in increasing the salience of a group category. The increased salience has further consequenc-