



Landscape

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When we think about landscape, we tend to think of natural scenery, empty of people; of a view, spread in front of our eyes; or of a backdrop, a stage for people's movements and activities. The anthropology of landscape challenges all of these ideas. By sharing and observing local lives through ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists have realised that landscapes matter deeply to people: they care about the landscapes they inhabit, materially shaping them and attaching meaning to them. Anthropologists have come to argue that people do not only live in landscapes but also through them: landscape is an intrinsic part of, or even actor in human social and cultural lives, constructed by them both physically and symbolically and, reciprocally, helping to make and unmake relationships and identities.

Landscape in the social sciences

The importance of landscape in human affairs was, perhaps predictably, recognised and studied by cultural geographers and archaeologists before anthropologists. Geography is of course centrally concerned with space, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s a number of studies focused on the experiential, subjective, [phenomenological](#) aspects of space and place (e.g. Buttimer & Seamon 1980; Tuan 1977); and on the symbolic meanings attached to landscape in the European tradition (e.g. Cosgrove 1985; Daniels & Cosgrove 1988). In particular, Cosgrove and others noted that the English term 'landscape' comes from the term of Dutch origin *landschap*, referring to a painted view of (usually rural) surroundings. As Hirsch notes (1995: 2), this means that the concept of landscape, if used unproblematically and uncritically, carries with it a range of culturally specific assumptions: that it is a visual phenomenon, implying a viewer and a view and so a disconnection between people and space; that it has aesthetic value, embodying a pleasing or 'picturesque' form; and that it is rural or to do with 'nature' and land rather than with people and urbanised surroundings. We will see below how Hirsch rethought the concept in a bid to produce a more culturally sensitive notion of 'landscape'.

The other discipline that historically has had a close interest in landscape is archaeology. Particularly in Britain, landscape became a central focus of archaeological attention in the inter-war period. The journal *Antiquity*, founded in this period, introduced the potential of aerial [photography](#), developed during the Great War, in making visible archaeological remains buried in the British countryside, and encouraged archaeologists to view and interpret sites and remains as part of structured, evolving 'landscapes',

inaugurating the notion of 'landscape archaeology' as a way to grasp and understand ancient ways of life. In a fascinating analysis of these developments, Hauser (2007) suggests that this was in part a response to the sight of the devastation of the Great War in France and Belgium in particular, which led [artists](#) and others (including archaeologists) to reimagine and cherish Britain as an antique land, with a landscape that embodied its [history](#) and heritage and could and should be protected against the new technologies of war and destruction.

More recently archaeologists have discussed the heritage value of landscape in Britain and beyond: in particular, Bender (1993) introduced the idea, central to understanding the role of landscape anthropologically, that groups of people attribute different [values](#) to the same landscape; for this reason, landscapes are a focus, and indeed a means, of political contestation and of the formation of different and competing identities. For instance, Bender showed that the landscape of Stonehenge was in the late 1990s (and remains today) the focus of competing interpretations and claims by heritage agencies acting on behalf of the British government and also by 'pagans' and others such as [tourists](#), each looking for rather different meanings and value within the same surroundings. This volume also introduced the idea that landscapes are not simply passive screens onto which people project values, but they can be actors in social and political conflict. Focusing on Belfast during the 'Troubles', anthropologist Neil Jarman (1993) shows that ideological divisions became embodied in the physical surroundings of the city, creating a feedback loop between space and people: boundaries between the warring groups were not only reinforced by erecting barricades and setting fire to [homes](#), but barriers also became focal points for violent action and so fostered the cycle of violence and division (1993: 111-2). Landscape is not just a backdrop but exerts a sort of '[agency](#)' in the unfolding of violent politics: because of its symbolic associations as well as its physical qualities (e.g. in creating barriers, regulating movement, etc.), space contributes to the production and reproduction of violent [relations](#), and insight that helps to analyse many current conflicts, such as that in Israel and the Palestinian territories (see, e.g., Weizman 2007).

So, what anthropologists and other social scientists mean by 'landscape' is the human interpretation and manipulation of the physical surroundings in which our individual and collective lives unfold. A 'landscape' is something constructed by humans in the course of their daily lives and interactions, both physically and also symbolically, by being invested with meaning, memory, and value. But moreover, anthropologists argue that the two – investing with meaning and shaping physically – go hand in hand and cannot really be separated. One way to conceptualise this is the notion of 'dwelling' introduced by Ingold (1995). With this term, borrowed and adapted from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Ingold sought to challenge a separation between the cognitive organization of space (e.g. the creation of mental plans or designs) and its physical shaping through building. Ingold argues that humans 'dwell' in the world, i.e. produce and [reproduce](#) human lives and relations through practically engaging with their physical surroundings. So for Ingold, 'building' – humanly modifying space – is an integral aspect of 'dwelling': the physical outcome of

the thoughtful, but necessarily embodied and emplaced business of social living, rather than an activity led by a disembodied intellect surveying its 'environment' as an object (see also Ingold 2000). This perspective invites us to view humans and physical surroundings as part of the same system: as Ingold puts it, the dwelling perspective treats humans as 'animals in their environment' rather than self-contained individuals engaging with the physical world as an object; dissolving 'the orthodox dichotomies between evolution and history, and between biology and culture' (1995: 77).

Ingold's approach has been used productively especially by archaeologists as well as anthropologists working with nomadic [hunter-gatherer](#) populations (e.g. Ingold & Mazzullo 2008), perhaps because it seems to imply a sort of seamless harmony between people and their surroundings that is difficult to envisage in the case of urbanised and/or larger-scale populations (but cf. McFarlane 2011). However, the idea that 'landscape' should not be understood as a thing independent of people, or even as a thing made by people, but as the outcome of the physical and symbolic implication of people with their surroundings, informs other anthropological approaches of wider applicability. In particular, anthropologists' comparative perspective and the encounter with non-European cultures leads them to question the very notion of 'space' as ethnocentric and to rethink what 'landscape' might be in even more radical ways.

Anthropological beginnings: 'space'

The basis for anthropology's refusal to take 'space' for granted as an objective reality external to humans' activities and perceptions can be traced back to Durkheim's seminal discussion of the social origin of the categories of human thought in his *Elementary forms of the religious life* (1912). In this text Durkheim addressed space as one of the fundamental 'categories of understanding', alongside time, number, cause, substance, and personality: these are 'the solid frames that enclose all thought' because without them no thought is possible (2001 [1912]: 11). Unlike Kant and other philosophers, however, Durkheim did not consider these categories to be innate, but rather 'social things', products of social life, and, in origin, of religious life and thought (2001 [1912]: 11). In the case of space, Durkheim argued that it is only perceptible as such insofar as it is divided and differentiated – into left and right, inside and outside, above and below, and so on: 'inherently, there is no right or left, above or below, north or south and so on' (2001 [1912]: 13). These divisions for him arise as people give an 'affective colour' to regions, adding that members of the same society hold in common these divisions, implying 'that they are social in origin' (2001 [1912]: 13). So the organization of space in each society is modelled on social organization 'and replicates it', not vice-versa; spatial divisions like left and right are not innate but originate from social and indeed religious thought. Indeed, for Durkheim the 'sacred' at the centre of religious thought is a form of spatial classification, insofar as he defines it as that which is 'set apart', separated conceptually but also, often, spatially, from the 'profane' (2001 [1912]: 36).

Durkheim's ideas inspired some classic early studies of socio-spatial organization, such as Mauss's 'Essai

sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos' (1904–1905) and, within British social anthropology, Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940). While neither refers to 'landscape', both suggest that the way people inhabit their physical surroundings is an important aspect of their society, but not as a determining factor: soil configuration and climate, writes Mauss, do not determine people's decision to live dispersed or instead in groups: this is determined by social factors such as their technological skills (which control how they exploit natural resources) and their 'moral, juridical and religious organisation', which determines whether they can form groups, of what size and so on (Mauss 1983 [1904–1905]: 393, author's translation). In his study of the Nuer of Southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard writes about their 'oecological space', which he describes as the relationship between the 'character of the country' and 'the biological requirements' of the members of local groups: e.g. availability of [water](#), the presence or absence of tsetse flies or of rivers and so on make the distance between local groups more or less impassable and so expands or shrinks 'mere physical distance' (1969 [1940]: 109). However, Nuer additionally give their spatial distributions 'certain values which compose their political structure'. In particular Nuer lives are governed by 'structural distance', 'the distance between groups of persons in a social system, expressed in terms of values' (Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940]: 110). Such [values](#) determine more centrally than physical factors the closeness or otherwise of villages from one another: 'A Nuer village may be equidistant from two other villages, but if one of these belongs to a different tribe and the other to the same tribe it may be said to be structurally more distant from the first than from the second' (Evans-Pritchard 1969 [1940]: 110). Social and political affiliations override spatial and territorial ones.

Evans-Pritchard's [ethnography](#) of the Nuer is not entirely consistent on this point. For instance in some of his other works, it appears that physical proximity and cohabitation are important bases of social unity and solidarity in this society, so that physical space does matter to the Nuer as they structure their society, and is even constitutive of their 'kinship' structure (1950: 364; cf. 1951; cf. Kuper 2005: 205). However, whether or not it corresponds with ethnographic reality (cf. Kuper 1983: 95), the discussion of 'time and space' in *The Nuer* introduces the intriguing idea that anthropologically speaking 'space' need not be linked with physical surroundings at all, but could be a dimension of human life and identity defined and charted by values and [relations](#), in this case those associated with kinship (more specifically descent from common ancestors) and political organization. So, in order to describe and analyse the Nuer's culturally specific conception and perception of their world, Evans-Pritchard formulated a non-literal concept of 'space', abstracted from territorial factors and linked instead with personhood, itself an abstract and culturally variable social construct (cf. Carrithers, Collins & Lukes 1985; Mauss 1983 [1938]).

Although Durkheim's notion of the social origin of knowledge was later criticised (see Bloch 1977), arguably a long-lasting contribution of these early studies for the study of 'landscape' is to suggest not only that people interpret physical space in different ways, but also that anthropologists need to problematise the very concept of 'space', treating it as a social construct with a culturally variable content. This insight

is central to more recent anthropological studies of landscape.

Rethinking 'landscape'

The division between sacred and profane space (and time) introduced by Durkheim is at the heart of William Christian's study of a religion in a Spanish valley, published in 1972 (1972: xv). The book focuses on shrines and on the 'supernatural rationale' for their location in the landscape, presenting them as 'control points at which the people attempt to influence the penetration of foreign material into their countryside' (Christian 1972: xv). Christian inverts the earlier anthropological convention of landscape as an inert backdrop to the people studied by piecing together the social and cultural world of the population of a northern Spanish valley *starting* from their landscape. In this study, the environmental setting is understood as an integral element of the society, a ground for it in the most profound sense of providing the means of articulating physically, conceptually, and imaginatively the relationships among persons and also, centrally, between 'person and God' (referred to in the title of the book), people and the powers that preside over their world, be they 'sacred' or 'profane'.

For instance, in a setting in which people move seasonally between village and uplands, changes of scenery are said to correspond to changing 'moods' among the population: in the upper pastures in spring and autumn, the mood is 'airy, open and honest' as people, 'free from the village', [share](#) food and tools, [work](#) together, often breaking into song (Christian 1972: 2). Back in the village, especially in winter, when the young are away on seasonal jobs and people live at close quarters, life 'is more difficult', the mood is of 'competition', 'there are people with whom, for one reason or another, one does not speak' (Christian 1972: 3). The landscape also articulates the villagers' identity and positioning in the wider world. The villagers have a 'series of identities' including the [house](#) and family, the village and parish, the valley, the region and the nation-state (Christian 1972: 42). These correspond to the 'matrix of human relations' on the ground, formed of 'what brings people together and what marks them off from each other', visible in how people behave and communicate, name and create physical and symbolic boundaries (Christian 1972: 11).

For Christian, this also, importantly, helps us to understand people's [relations](#) with the divine: the matrix of their relations 'provides the context into which relations with the divine must fit' (1972: 11). So, corresponding to the geographical levels of the inhabitants' life and identity are specific divine figures (saints, or advocations of the Virgin Mary) to whom they pray, 'implanted' in the landscape through shrines: to levels of identity, correspond, in a memorable phrase, 'territories of grace' (Christian 1972: 44-5). Christian makes clear that, especially in the case of devotions that are unique to this valley and its population (as opposed to the 'generalised', national-level devotions) the shrines are one with the landscape: the images and their powers are immovable, people must go to them: the shrines are 'transaction points in the landscape between the human group, the land, and the powers that influence the success of the group's enterprises' (1972: 45). In practice, the saints are approached as 'patrons',

intermediaries towards God but also more broadly foreign, external powers, 'above and below' the here and now of the village, an aspect for Christian alluded to by the location of many shrines at 'critical points in the ecosystem' such as mountain peaks, springs, and caves (1972: 181). Also, like living patrons, saints are applied to individually and from different levels of identity, so that the heterogeneity (both physical and spiritual) of the landscape is one with the heterogeneity of local society. Overall, this study resonates with Durkheimian approaches but also, in its attention to the landscape (physical and spiritual) as a principle and means of heterogeneity rather than unity, it anticipates themes found in the 'anthropology of landscape' that started in the 1990s (for another, more recent study that directly rethinks space in relation to the Durkheimian 'sacred/profane' dichotomy, see Munn 2003).

The anthropology of landscape

In the mid-1990s, two edited collections (Feld & Basso 1996; Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995) and a reader (Low & Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003) mark the self-conscious bid to develop a distinctively anthropological approach to landscape. Their central aim is to 'unpack Western concepts' of landscape, place, and space (Feld & Basso 1996: 6; cf. Hirsch 1995: 2) and make theoretically visible 'spatial dimensions of culture' (Low & Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003: 1). The most concerted (and complex) effort to do this is found in Hirsch and O'Hanlon's volume in which Hirsch argues that the notion of 'landscape' as physical surroundings is culturally specific to the modern West (1995: 5). In order to develop a cross-culturally valid notion, he proposes an ego-centred approach in which 'landscape' is not a relationship with physical surroundings, but the relationship between two 'poles of experience' through which people negotiate everyday social life and practice (1995: 4-5, 22).

Specifically Hirsch defines 'landscape' as the ongoing 'cultural process' (1995: 5) by which we mentally and imaginatively locate ourselves in the world, through envisaging a 'background' and a 'foreground' to our existence at each moment, and their dynamic and changeable interplay. This can be understood spatially: being 'here' (at a specific location) is understood and experienced at each moment in relation to one or more 'there', which form its horizon in terms of my own experience (e.g. in my daily routine the 'horizon' for being 'here' at the office is being 'there' at home; in terms of my movements this month, the horizon for being 'here' in Cambridge is being 'there' in Italy and so on). However, for Hirsch moving away from a Western understanding of landscape means that we must take into account that people understand persons and their location in the world in culturally specific ways. This helps us to see that the familiar Western 'place' and 'space' are culturally specific metaphors for mutually constituted vantage points that do not need to involve land, objectively and physically understood, at all. Instead, cultures have specific ways of envisaging the dialectical tension between 'here' and 'there', understood as the more and less immediate reaches of human [agency](#) and personhood, practice and ideal, everyday experience and the 'background' to it. For instance, the 'distant horizon' for the here and now, which in Western understanding is objectified

as 'space' and understood through the text-based metaphor of the 'map', can in other cultural settings be objectified and understood as a horizon made, for instance, by the stories, memories, and traces of the activities of ancestors (in Amazonia: Gow 1995; in Australia: Layton 1995; Morphy 1995), or by cosmic non-human energies accessed and harnessed via chiefly or shamanic powers (in Mongolia: Humphrey 1995). This approach also helps to denaturalise and relativise the Western notion of 'landscape'. This seems literal and culturally unmediated (e.g. as a subject's view of an object, 'land', which is given independently of culture and is immediately available to the senses, particularly sight). However, if we adopt Hirsch's perspective, we can argue that what we call 'landscape' is not so much a thing 'out there' as the tension between the here and now of the viewer and 'imagined worlds of being and potential': for instance Green's chapter in the volume by Hirsch and O'Hanlon shows that in nineteenth century France the emergence of the idea of 'paysage', identified with the countryside and as a space for 'nature', was part of how people rethought their position in society, formed a consciousness of class in an urban and urbanising context (Green 1995).

Gell's contribution to the same volume introduces another way in which 'landscape' can be relativised. In an account of Umeda, Papua New Guinea, Gell argues that the actual physical environment which Umeda inhabit shapes the way in which spatial distance and proximity can be experienced. Umeda live in small clearings in thick forest and this 'imposes a reorganisation of their sensibility' (1995: 235), which makes hearing (and smell) a much more reliable means of sensing distance and proximity than sight. For instance, it was said that the first group of Umeda ever to visit the coast could not perceive the sea as a receding space, but instead perceived it as a vertical wall of [water](#) (1995: 235). Because of this, for Gell the Umeda landscape is first and foremost a 'soundscape' arising from the interplay between ambient sound and the body through different qualities of word-sounds which encode the experiences of 'ambient sound' and the body as a 'sounding cavity' (1995: 240). This is 'mapped', i.e. represented, not through [visual](#) means (such as maps or other visual images) but by sound 'images', specifically through verbal sounds in the local language that iconically render via the culturally specific connotations of consonant sounds the physical extremes of proximity and distance, of the village clearing, and the encircling forest and mountain escarpments. For instance, the sound 's' found in *sis* for 'mountain' carries connotations of sharpness, danger, etc., making 'audible' the mountain, depicting through sounds the physicality of the sharp, tall ridges that constitute the 'distant horizon' of Umeda villages (1995: 242). Gell does not, like Hirsch, relativise 'landscape' by abstracting the concept from people's embodied location in the world: instead, he roots culturally constituted landscape in the interplay between the sensing body and its particular surroundings (1995: 252; cf. also Feld 1996).

The interplay between body and surroundings is also explored in Feld and Basso's volume (1996), which focuses on the idea of 'place' and on how from a subjective point of view, people transform 'sheer physical terrain' into an 'existential space' through their imagination and memory (Casey 1996: 14). In other words,

the sensing, attentive subject and the geographical object come together. This crucially occurs through the body, as the vehicle for what could be termed the thoughtful sensing of the environing world (cf. Ingold 2000). For Basso, in culturally diverse ways people attend to their surroundings and in practice certain locations can trigger strong emotions or thoughts 'of a richly caring kind' (Basso 1996: 54). So he argues that the relationship with places, like all relationships, is reciprocal: 'as places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed [...] when places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind' (1996: 55). Through this, 'places come to generate their own fields of meaning' (1996: 56). Basso illustrates this by showing the central role of places in how Western Apache develop 'wisdom'. Apache define 'wisdom' as a heightened mental capacity that enables people to avoid harmful events by detecting hidden threats. It is developed by thinking about stories that instruct about wise and unwise ways of behaving, judging situations, etc. These stories for Apache 'sit' in places: that is, they feature and are associated with named places, which people visit bodily or in the [mind](#) in order to access and recall the narratives on their way to wisdom (1996: 73). Visiting, observing, and learning the names of places is the means to develop wisdom, so that for Basso the Apache's 'interior landscape' - their sense of self and [moral](#) imagination (1996: 86) - is crucially constructed in constant interaction with the exterior one.

'Landscape' in a changing world

The case study above takes us back to the idea, introduced in an earlier section, that landscapes can be seen as actors in human individual and social life, directly involved with the making and unmaking of relationships and identities. We can see that not only do people use and interpret their surroundings as part of living and inhabiting, but land and surroundings help us 'interpret ourselves', so to speak: they feature in narratives we make about ourselves, help us tell ourselves 'who' we are individually or collectively. We can talk about being 'attached' emotionally to places and landscapes, but it's almost more as if they were 'attached' to us, 'ours'. There is a dialectic of recognition between familiar surroundings and those for whom they are familiar - the land comes to 'resemble' us as we inhabit it, it becomes charged with value insofar as it embodies an image of ourselves. While this may perhaps seem confined to populations, such as Apache, who live both physically and spiritually 'close' to the land, this is not the case:

Now that the heat of battle is extinguished, this chaos of soil and stones under a sky so gloomy seems absurd. Thought no longer finds a relationship between that, which resembles nothing, and we, who have lived so many things in the course of our lives. (Pézard 1974 [1918], author's translation).

These words, written by an army officer about the devastation in rural Eastern France during the Great War, show that even in this least 'traditional' of contexts, landscape is a ground for meaning and identity,

so that its destruction causes shock, disorientation, and profound estrangement. So, too, it is in our industrialised, 'modern' societies that 'place annihilation' (Hewitt 1983) has become one of the most lethal weapons in contemporary warfare, which since World War I includes among its aims the eradication of whole enemy cultures and ways of life (Kramer 2007). It could also be argued, following Pierre Nora (1989), that catastrophic experiences of rupture and dislocation in modernity make people more, not less conscious of 'places' (both physical sites, and sites of the imagination) as repositories for belonging and meaning (cf. Filippucci 2010). This includes the conditions of contemporary modernity in which individual and collective experiences of, and relationships with, space are said to be transformed and unsettled by increasingly powerful technologies of speed, virtual connection, and destruction, leading peoples and identities to be displaced and delocalised or even acquire 'a slippery, nonlocalized quality' (Appadurai 1996: 48; cf. Connerton 2009; Gupta & Ferguson 1997; Harvey 1989).

So, in conclusion, the study of 'landscape' is shown to be anthropologically fertile, a ground for theoretical innovation, and for disclosing core aspects of the human social and cultural experience in a changing world.

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