
**Commentary 1**

Citation analysis can be a blunt tool for assessing the importance of a publication. Citation databases vary in their coverage, with the main ones performing best when dealing with their heartland in American science. Numerical scores do not reflect the context in which a source is cited. Nevertheless, in this instance the figures tell an interesting story. Many publications gain impressive citation scores during the period they reflect current concerns, but few survive the impact of changing intellectual climates to secure higher scores as the years go by. That, however, is the achievement of *Place and placelessness*. Ted Relph’s book was cited far more in the 1990s and into the new millennium than it was in the second half of the 1980s, strongly suggesting the strength of its appeal to a new generation of readers.

It would have taken considerable intuition to predict that outcome when the book appeared in 1976. As a text that challenged rather than supported dominant approaches to human–environment relations, *Places and placelessness* stood a fair chance of being either overlooked or disregarded. For classroom purposes, it was more likely to have been supplementary than core reading (Gold 1977: 43). Moreover, it did not seem the type of book destined to pick up bookshop sales. While inflation has long since dented my ability to judge whether or not the original price of £4.50 for a volume of scarcely 150 pages was reasonable, its marketability was not helped by design that was, to say the least, quirky. The text was asymmetrically positioned on the page, with wide top and narrow bottom margins and no right-hand justification. The script was in small font and many photographs were poorly reproduced. The dust jacket featured a nondescript geometric swirl on the front and, remarkably, the description of a completely different book on the back.

Yet, as usual, the message was more important than the medium. *Place and placelessness* was a lucid and inventive book that challenged the practices of contemporary human geography and offered new ways forward. Its lucidity stemmed particularly from its author’s meticulous attention to structure, in particular his use of lists to anchor the discussion. The Preface listed four central themes which, when taken together, structured a free-ranging argument about the intimate relationships between people and the places they experience. These themes were discussed sequentially in the eight chapters that followed. The chapters themselves were in numbered sections that often contained numbered subsections. Within the text were lists prefaced by Roman
numerals, lists with Arabic numerals and alphabetical lists. In less capable hands, this would be a recipe for pedantry, but that was not so here. The structure was overt but never obtrusive, effectively providing a backdrop for an argument that interwove philosophical interpretation with acute observation of real-world planning and design.

So what, then, are the reasons for the book’s impact? In the short-to-medium term, its influence came primarily through being one of a handful of texts that radically expanded the purview of geographical research on human–environmental relations. In 1976, such research was characterized by neopositivist approaches, a focus on space, and leanings towards psychological theory and mathematical modelling. Relph helped to counter these orientations. His interests lay in the intimacies of place and the particularities of landscape; his favoured literature belonged to the humanities more than the social sciences; and his approach was derived from humanistic rather than positivist philosophy.

The philosophical orientation was particularly significant. Relph had turned to alternative approaches out of dissatisfaction with existing debate about environmental issues. He was not the only geographer interested in using phenomenology to understand the lived experience of place, but he was one of the most effective geographical writers on the subject. The secret lay in a light touch. Relph (e.g., 1976) had written about the phenomenological foundations of geography per se, but had the confidence to leave much of the technical language out of *Place and placelessness*. The result was that while others laboured with layers of opaque philosophical discourse that effectively constructed barriers to understanding, Relph concentrated on showing the value of phenomenology through the issues that it raised and the insights it afforded. In doing so, his book made an important contribution to the role played by humanistic geography in encouraging geographers to look beyond established traditions and to recognize the potential of alternative schools of social and cultural explanation.

That its impact did not end with the brief heyday of humanistic geography owes much to the power of the book’s central idea. Relph was modest about the origins of several new terms offered by *Place and placelessness*, for example, crediting a colleague as being the source of the terms ‘Disneyfication’ and ‘museumization’. Yet although acknowledging Heidegger as a source of inspiration, there is little doubt Relph himself coined the word ‘placelessness’. In doing so, he did more than just supply a term for the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes caused by insensitivity to the significance of place. Rather, he created a concept that provided a new way of looking at phenomena not previously considered collectively. Loss of place identity was something that had received comment before (e.g., Nairn, 1955; Cullen, 1961), but Relph showed the existence of a pervasive tendency in a wide range of contexts, including the design of tourist resorts, theme parks, malls, commercial strips, new towns and suburbia. It was associated not just with superficial loss of physical distinctiveness but also with loss of meaning, including the replacement of the ‘authentic’ by the ‘inauthentic’.

These ideas had contentious elements, especially with regard to identifying the ‘authenticity’ of place (e.g., Duncan, 2000), but they helped introduce an enduring agenda of issues. That agenda, in turn, struck a resonant chord with new areas of social science and humanities research that developed in the 1990s. The expansion of research in areas such as cultural history, landscape studies, vernacular architecture, heritage
interpretation, leisure planning and tourism heightened interest in the sense of place and in the forces leading to its destruction. Understandably the context had changed, with the cognitive-behaviouralist undertones of mid-1970s debate having long since faded away. Nevertheless, a new readership has clearly discovered that *Place and placelessness* still contains a repository of incisive and topical ideas. That, by any standards, is a remarkable accomplishment for a book published a quarter-of-a-century ago.

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Commentary 2

Recently, geographers have started to become more aware of a major process of society and space that is termed ‘mobility’. One important issue is, therefore, that of people’s relation to places in the context of the practice of a great number of places. I would like to show briefly how *Place and placelessness* is of greatest interest in raising and dealing with this issue. Indeed, *Place and placelessness* has not only a historical value for geographers but it has also opened many research directions that are yet to be explored. In fact, the only argument most geographers retained is that of the loss of the identity of places – termed ‘placelessness’. A second research direction retained is the transposition of the phenomenological approach in geography that had started with Relph (1970) and Tuan (1971) and was followed by Buttimer (1976), Ley (1977), Buttimer and Seamon (1980) and Pickles (1985). But the book is much richer and deserves a greater attention. The very differentiated concept of place, the question of the growing ‘placelessness’, the difference established between identity of places and identity with places as expressing two different viewpoints, the search for a coherent articulation of two main geographical concepts, space and place, are lessons that have been disregarded. Although all these important matters deserve critical appraisal, I shall focus on two main implications for geography: first, the very differentiated concept of place may help us to construct a more coherent geographical thinking; and, secondly, the distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ to places that could help us nowadays to resolve the question of the consequences of mobility on the place relations of the individuals.

Relph constructs a place concept that is incomparably richer and more adequate than the ‘humanistic’ mainstream en vogue in the 1970s. He operates two main differentiations in the definition of place. First, place is not only a small spatial unit:
As objects in their own right, places are essentially focuses of intention, usually having a fixed location and possessing features which persist in an identifiable form. Such places may be defined in terms of the functions they serve or in terms of communal and personal experience. They can be at almost any scale, depending on the manner in which our intentions are directed and focused – as a nationalist my place is the nation, but in other situations my place is the province or region in which I live, or the city or the street or the house that is my home (p. 43, emphasis added).¹

Places are thus defined as centres of meaning for people at any scale, rather than just locations at a local scale.

Secondly, although the place concept is constructed as a subjective relation between individuals and a place, it is not seen as a particular relation of one person to one place. The word ‘subjective’ signifies the relevance to subjects and not to the particular individual: hence, the sense of place may be the same for several people. Places are not (only) unique or particular, they are also constituted by elements to be found in other places. Although places are ‘unique’ in terms of their content they are nevertheless products of common cultural and symbolic elements and processes’ (p. 44, emphasis added). Even the identity of people with places results from a socially constructed gaze by groups. So the subjective–objective debate is displaced on another ground.

The distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ to a place is a second research direction opened by Relph. Instead of focusing only on attachment to places or representations, he considers different types of place relations that are linked to the different ways people experience space:

The various forms of space lie within a continuum that has direct experience at one extreme and abstract thought at the other extreme. Within this continuum certain types of space can be distinguished, for instance that of unselfconscious and pragmatic experiences, the selfconsciously experienced perceptual space of individuals, the built spaces of architecture, and the abstract space of geometry (p. 8, emphasis added).

For a person to be considered as an insider he or she has to have an involved relation to a place; alternatively, an outsider has a more detached relation to a place.² This distinction is constructed as two poles of a continuum of place experiences using two criteria: being more or less involved in a place, and more or less conscious of it.

These differences seem to be of greatest importance in a world where individuals practise a multiplicity of places: they are sometimes insiders and sometimes outsiders, following the social context of their action and their intentions. These situations could vary for the same individual and Relph makes some of these clear – notably that the tourist’s experience of place contrasts with the resident’s experience of place. As a result, this differentiated view of place relations assigns a particular position to the phenomenological approach. Relph goes beyond the everyday lifeworld as taken-for-granted and prereflexive, which he considers as only one way of experiencing places: we cannot construct this particular relation as a general relation to places (and thus for the place concept). If we take the hypothesis of the ‘taken-for-granted’ world too seriously, we are unable to understand the possibilities of taking distance from the everyday world – for example, by changing place in going on holiday or by an ‘abstract thought’ on places. Being an outsider, being detached from a place, is precisely the distanciation from the everyday world. To make my point, in a world where people switch more or less constantly between being insiders and outsiders, the construction of an everyday place relation as the only sense of place has to be revisited. That is what Relph called for.

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Notes

1. All citations are from the 4th edition of 1986.
2. It is interesting to note that Norbert Elias constructs, in his sociology of science, the difference between the everyday experience and the scientific experience in the same two terms: ‘involvement’ and ‘detachment’.


Author’s response: Place and placelessness in a new context

I was once told that Place and placelessness was successful because it is short enough to be read in a couple of hours. A back-handed compliment, but the point was that bored students and harried professors might have been able to digest the entire argument. I also think it was the first book in geography about the concept of place, and one of the first to adopt a phenomenological perspective. These simple facts are probably enough to account for its reasonably high scores in citation indices. I am nevertheless surprised by John Gold’s discovery that citations to Place and placelessness have increased over the last decade, and I am intrigued by his comments and those of Mathis Stock that its ideas still have currency. While I appreciate their remarks, my opinion about the current relevance of Place and placelessness may be somewhat more circumspect than theirs because I think that subsequent intellectual, social and political shifts have dated some of its arguments.

In the early 1970s, when I was writing Place and placelessness, the world seemed to present itself as a series as quite clear oppositions. The old military-industrial establishment was being confronted by popular protests for peace, environmental protection and civil rights. And at the same time there was a deep division within geography between those who celebrated the discipline as an emergent spatial science using quantitative methods, and those who held that qualitative approaches and a broad outlook had sustained geography throughout its two thousand year history and should not be abandoned for some positivist upstart.

Place and placelessness sprang from this latter school of thought, mixed with support for the popular protests. It had its specific origin in the simple realization that the idea of place, which had been central to geography since classical times, had never been critically examined. As I began to explore the various ways the concept had been and was being used, it soon became apparent that spatial scientists had changed the
grounds for constructing a geographical argument because they used scientific methods based in the philosophy of science. Any credible argument about place had to be equally well grounded in philosophy and method. I had learnt the rudiments of phenomenology from Joe May, a philosopher of geography at Toronto, and was aware that it had developed in part as a critical alternative to positivism and the philosophy of science. Phenomenology provided me with both the foundation and the approach I needed to discuss place.

The idea of placelessness also emerged from an opposition – between modernist and traditional design. As John Gold points out, Nairn, Cullen and others had criticized the impact of modernist, standardized designs on older and diverse landscapes. I borrowed from their ideas as well as their methods of representing landscapes with photographs, applied a phenomenological filter, and called the result ‘placelessness’.

The context of opposites is reflected in the binary language that is obvious in the title, and in paired notions such as insideness and outsideness, authentic and inauthentic. Gold and Stock suggest generously that Place and placelessness offers differentiated concepts, and presents continuities rather than sharp differences. Many of those who have cited it over the years, however, have emphasized the distinctions and paid little attention to the continuities. In fact, regardless of whether the key concepts are understood as continuities or pairs of opposites, it appears to me now that the world has moved on and that they have to be critically reinterpreted.

For instance, the philosophical distinctions which were one of my methodological well-springs have become blurred. Positivism has been disrobed because assumptions about the neutrality of measurement, verification and explanation have been exposed; scientific method now has to be regarded as a particular type of social activity rather than a route to objective knowledge (Latour, 1993; Hacking, 1999). Phenomenology has, in fact, been a source of important insights for philosophers of science (Rorty, 1993), and in geography it has been largely overtaken by a wide range of other critical and qualitative approaches. The Heideggerian version which I used has been tainted by the revelation of his Nazi associations, and it would be naïve to use it now without acknowledging the implications of this.

In design the once clear distinction between modernism and everything else has been weakened, first by the revival of postmodernism and then by countless hybrids – late-modernism, neorationalism, deconstructionism, neotraditionalism. Standardization, which once meant uniformity, now offers the means to customize designs for particular localities. Uniformity has been displaced by contrived design differences. Disneyfication has moved out of theme parks into the rest of the world (Sorkin, 1992), and the result is that distinctive landscapes, which formerly were important though superficial indicators of the authenticity of place, now reveal nothing dependable. Each place has to be assessed carefully and on its own terms.

Stock’s suggestion that increased mobility changes place experience is, I think, an important one. Perhaps as recently as a century ago the majority of people lived where they were born or could find work, and travelled very little. In the last few decades, with motorways and air travel and global migrations and television, the range of experienced geography has increased enormously. It is inconceivable that this has not changed sense of place, and that we experience geography in very different ways from our grandparents, though I do not think it can be assumed that more mobility implies a lesser intensity of place experience.
Place and placelessness treats place in a nonpolitical way, possibly because it was written just as political-economy approaches to geography were being developed. David Harvey (1989), Doreen Massey (1993) and others have subsequently shown how places can have deeply political dimensions. For example, their identities can be commodified and exploited by flexible capital in order to promote tourism and attract business. Conversely, places can act as springboards for political resistance, as in the suppressed protest in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, or in community opposition to development projects imposed from outside such as the Narmada Valley dams in India. Yet while sense of place can be empowering, it has also become clear from events in Bosnia and Rwanda that it can have an ugly or poisoned aspect which is exclusionary and at its worst contributes to ethnic cleansing (Relph, 1997). The politics of place are neither predictable nor straightforward.

It is gratifying to learn from Mathis Stock and John Gold that ideas I expressed 25 years ago can still offer insights into the complex ways in which individuals and communities relate to the world around them. I caution, however, that it would be a mistake to accept these ideas uncritically, for both the world and the ways we can think about it have changed since then. The phenomena of place and placelessness are variable in both time and space, and the language to describe them has to be continually revised if it is to clarify rather than obfuscate what is happening.

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