In between materiality and metaphor.

The ambivalence of space.

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Despite the incredible variety of dimensions and meanings, the definitions of space appears constantly to oscillate between two different, and apparently opposed, conceptions. On the one hand, space tends to be considered as an objective characteristic of things. In this meaning it is mainly related to the materiality of social life, is the empirical, «concrete», substratum of society. On the other hand sociology has strongly emphasised the variability and heterogeneity of this dimension. According to this second view, space is a way of representing society. In this paper I will try to show how it is possible to interpret this duality in terms of “individual” versus “society” or in terms of “nature” versus “society”. In the first case objectivity of space lies in the process of externalisation and objectification and the relationship between the two elements can be expressed through Giddens’ concept of duality. In the second, the “external” and “constraining” nature of space, lies outside society and Simmel’s concept of dualism or ambivalence (tension between the opposing nature of two elements) is a more suitable idea of relating the two aspects of space.

KEYWORDS: space; individual vs. society; nature vs. society; duality; dualism.
1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed the emergence of space as a strong sociological object\(^1\). The spatial perspective turned out to be not only a new (or renewed) area of studies but above all an extremely productive way of looking at the nature of society. While the knowledge of spatial processes and modifications has doubtless increased, and space has gained a more important role in sociological theory, the nature of space itself remains in many ways a puzzle.

If we look at the sociological acquisitions on space we are immediately faced with a large variety of dimensions, referring to different explanatory powers, which are not always very easily traceable to a common source. This multiplicity of analytical levels is potentially endless, considering all the possibilities of “especes d’espaces” (Perec, 1979) which can be detected according to the culture we consider, the discipline we use, the point of observation we choose. Despite this incredible variety of dimensions and meanings, however, the definitions of space appears constantly to oscillate between two different, and apparently opposed, conceptions.

On the one hand, space tends to be considered as an objective characteristic of things. While the temporal dimension is invisible and mysterious, and always needs a metaphor (which is often spatial: a circle, an arrow, a point) to describe and represent it, space is quite often conceived as an external and “objective” dimension of society. The fact that we live on the comparatively stable surface of the earth almost creates the impression that space is there to be seen and grasped (Barbour, 1982). In this meaning space is mainly related to the materiality of social life, it is the empirical, «concrete», substratum of society. This “ecological and morphological surface”, which appears to be independent from individual and collective subjects is a quantitative, continuous and reversible dimension (Gurvitch, 1969).

\(^1\) The literature on space is by now quite extensive. Amongst the most representative and influential studies: Giddens (1990), Harvey (1990), Friedland and Boden (1994), Werlen (1993).
On the other hand, as a sort of reaction to the preponderance of the objective meaning of space, sociology has strongly emphasised the variability and heterogeneity of this dimension. (Harvey, 1990). According to this second view, space is a way of representing society. In this sense it is as metaphorical as time is. Not only the forms of space vary according to the culture or even the class membership but the nature itself of this dimension seems to change with society. The qualitative and discontinuous space of pre-modern societies is replaced by the Euclidean and perspective space of Enlightenment and finally by the multidimensional and fragmented space of Postmodernity. (Lefevre, 1974).

The representations of space (and time) in modern societies seems to enlarge the cleavage between these two sides of space, increasing at the same time both heterogeneity and objectivity. Space appears to be, at the same time, more objective and concrete (due to the standardisation produced by technology) and more relative and metaphorical (due to the pluralisation of social and subjective definitions).

On the one hand, in fact, technology seems to affirm and even amplify the objective nature of space. The production of space appears to be strongly related more to the unavoidable and impersonal character of time-space compression (the space defined and measured through the new technological means of transportation and communication: the car, the telephone, the plane or the computer) than to the variety of social practices. At the same time the growing importance of functional spaces in cities (spaces which are constructed and directed to specific purposes: transportation, transit, business, leisure) leads to the preponderance of abstract, generic and modular spaces, reproducing the same patterns all over the world\(^2\).

Conversely the growing importance of this abstract and technological space goes along with an unceasing tendency to the subjectivisation of space. Not by accident, it is especially from the turn of the century (together with the standardisation of space and time) that the homogeneity of space has been

\(^2\) Also, the relationship between social actors and space is standardised. Individuals are recognised and identified only at the entrance or the exit, while they live within places as consumers, passengers, users.
questioned and its heterogeneity has been recognised. In this period Durkheim wrote the *Elementary forms of religious life*, philosophy developed the perspectives approach, non-Euclidean geometry was been created, while the arts develop expressive forms (such as impressionism and cubism) based on the pluralisation and relativisation of space (Kern, 1985).

In this paper I will try to discuss how the double nature of space has to be considered at two different levels, establishing differently the objectivity of space and requiring a different way of describing the relationship between the two elements of the dichotomy.

It is possible to envision the two sides of space as referring to the relation/opposition between individual and society. In this view the duality of space can be seen as two different moments of the social processes of production. Objectivity, in this account, lies in the process of externalisation and objectification. If we accept this point of view, the relationship between the two elements can be expressed through Giddens’ concept of *duality* (two analytically different moments of the same process).

The duality of space can also be interpreted in terms of “nature” versus “culture”. The “objective”, “external” and “constraining” nature of space, in this case, lies outside society (being at the same time the basis for the different culturally defined forms of space). I will try to show that this “pre-social” objectivity of space can be very interesting based on Simmel’s account of space as an apriori category of the mind. If we think of the double side of space in this way, Simmel’s concept of *dualism* or *ambivalence* (tension between the opposing nature of two elements) is a more suitable way of relating the two sides of space.

2. *Geographical and social space: analogies, metaphors, superimpositions*

There is no doubt that sociology has encountered numerous difficulties in dealing with space, which can account for its having been for a long time put on the side. These difficulties are certainly and mainly due to the problem of
disentangling the “natural” from the “social” elements of space. The confusion between social and physical space is due not only to the fact (much more easily appreciable and very often recognised) that the nature of space is social (its forms and meanings are socially constructed) but also to the fact that the nature of society is intrinsically spatial. Space (as only recently has been fully understood) is one of the most important yarn constituting the fabric of society.

As a matter of fact, the analogies between “space” and “society” are very strong. In sociological vocabulary, for instance, the word «social space» is used to point at the abstract field of the relationships between individuals and social groups, making it difficult to find the right expression to distinguish this space from a bodily, territorial one. “The social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation and distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question. Agents are defined by their relative positions within that space....(this) space of relationship ...is as real as a geographical space” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724).

Society is quite often described in spatial terms, presenting itself as a social topology. Expressions like field, borders, action space, centre, and of positional terms, like location, position, are quite common in sociological language. These spatial metaphors are strongly insidious and almost invisible, simply because they are much more abstract than other metaphors used in Sociology (like organism, text, play) and can be usually blurred with ones normally present in every day language. In fact spatial metaphors remain a rather implicit and underconceptualised feature of sociological thinking (Silber, 1995; 1996).

Simmel’s sociology is probably the most fascinating example of the intricate interlacing of concrete and metaphorical space. The spatial forms “crystallising” social relations refer to the physical space and, at the same time, are widely used as metaphors of society.

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3 Others difficulties can be related to the institutional demands of sociology of distinguishing itself from the other social disciplines (mainly geography and history).
The spatial centre is, for instance, only one of the manifestations of centrality, conceived as a characteristic implied in every society of organising itself around a fulcrum which can be merely symbolic (Cfr. also Shils, 1975). Also the border, viewed in Simmel’s *Sociology of space* as a frame, is a general principle of organisation of experience a way to cut comprehend reality in order to construct the meaning of events\(^4\). The difficulties in reading Simmels’s essays of space (probably even more than for others part of the *Soziologie*) are due the continuous alternation and mixture of concrete and metaphorical uses of space\(^5\).

Another good example is the way sociology has dealt with the concept of locality, which is supposed to “translate” physical space in terms of social spaces. The difficulties and confusion in the translation are certainly due to the fact that analogues to physical space confound the proper differentiation of levels within social spaces. Sorting out levels is a difficult puzzle (White, 1992). The forms of incidence of “social” on “physical” space are more transparent and easily recognised in societies where the logic of embeddedness prevails in the organisation of space (mixing together boundary with locality issues has, in this case, no serious consequences). The village community, based on co-presence, is a spatially bound object. With the processes of disembedding and distantiation the intersection between social and physical space become blurred, space is better defined in terms of flows, making it difficult to identify spatially bound objects.

The ambivalent state of the traditional spatial objects (the city, the community) reflects this mutable and complicated intersection between the two dimensions\(^6\). On the one side urban sociology has developed as a sub-discipline basing its specificity in the city as a spatial object. At the same time, many students have emphasised the inability of urban sociology to identify any specific social process which is peculiar to the city as a spatially bound unit.

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\(^4\) In this meaning is very similar to Goffman’s (1986) definition of frame.

\(^5\) Simmel gives us a clue to understand why this is so as I will try to show in par. 4.

\(^6\) According to White (1992) *Blockmodels* and *localities* are two contrasting simplifications of social formations resulting from control struggles. Blockmodelling is in purely social space. Sets of ties will be concatenated to suggest meshing with sets of stories. Localities, on the other hand, determine types of networks in term of productions, weaving together sets of stories for the latter.
The city in classical sociology has been in fact not a specific object but a microcosm where to size the processes operating within society as a whole (Saunders, 1985).

3. The duality of space: social morphology and social space

One of the most widespread interpretations of the double nature of space starts from the idea that space does not have a language independent from social facts. In this approach, spheres related to nature, materiality and technology are to be considered at the same level as social institutions or economic and political systems. They are all produced by social relationships, but present themselves as rigid and external frames around the individual. In this sense the objectivity of space is due to the social processes of externalisation and objectification. Once space has been produced and comes out from society, it is perceived by the individuals as something detached, external, natural.\(^7\)

Durkheim is the most well known precursor of this approach. In Durkheimian sociology, the metaphorical and the concrete nature of space are both expression of society. The first as its symbolic representation, the second as the “material” mark left by it.

In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* he criticises the idea that categories of knowledge are based on logical relationships which are immanent to the human intellect. For Durkheim, instead, basic categories of thought such as space and time and the nature of all classification are dependent on the specific structure of society. The calendar express the rhythm of the social collectivity, the topography of places embodies social classifications. According to this author, social categories are thus collective representations. They express the social organisation and the particular world view of a society. If this is determined primarily by religion, for instance, the dimensions of the physical, spatial frame of reference will be influenced by the relevant mythology or dogmas.

\(^7\) This process is described by Soja (1980) as the “socio-spatial” dialectic”. Giddens opposes space as a relational construct to space as a created environnement (for also, Harvey, 1992).
On the other hand, Durkheim describes space as the *material substratum of society*. *Social morphology*, as the “territorial distribution of social facts”, is somehow a dimension *external* to society, exerting a constraint over the individual. Products of past practices, allow for some activities and obstruct others. Durkheim points out, however, that the material substratum of society does not have an important role in sociological explanation, because it is the product of previous social activities. Social morphology is a crystallised form of social reality. According to the methodological principle that social facts have to be explained by social facts, the only active factor remains in the human sphere\(^8\).

Furthering this line of analysis, the materiality of space cannot be referred to nature as opposed to society (as the common use of the term physical space seems to suggest). Lefebre (1974) has persuasively, criticised the view that there is a nature pre-existing socialisation. “Nature space”, which is usually called geographic space, is the base, the raw material of production of space. This space can never be recovered to a “zero point” since it is mixed with social space. Space depart from and at the same time destroys nature.

A way to deal with the double nature of space (from the actors point of view) under Durkheim and Lefebre’s definition of objectivity, is through Giddens’s concept of *duality*. This concept has to do with the processes of production and reproduction of social practices. It refers in particular to the double nature of structure (conceived as a set of rules and resources organised as properties of social systems). Duality means therefore that structure is the medium and the outcome of the conduct it recursively organises. In Giddens’ account, the constitution of agents and structures, are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. Giddens description is based on the fact that structure has to be considered as a set of characteristics which can be seen as a resource (enabling) and as a condition\(^8\).

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\(^8\) Durkheim considers the useful role of morphological facts in the explanation of society. The most well known case is the Durkheimian explanation of the influence of density on the development of the division of labour. Durkheim was the first to analyse the consequences of the processes of spatio-temporal convergence on society. The concept of density refers to the decreasing of «real distance» between individuals, as a result of an increase in population, the development of cities and the development of better means of transportation (Kern, 1985, p. 278-9).
(constraining). Considering these two effects together makes it possible to link action and structure.

Dimensions of space can be analytically distinguishable according to this concept. Space can be seen both as the medium of human practices and their outcome. The two central concepts in Giddens theory in fact (the concept of regionalization and that of locale) can be analysed as two moments of social production of space and time.

Locale is a physical region seen as part of the setting of interaction; in this sense it is a medium of social practices. Regionalization is the temporal and spatial differentiation of regions both within and between locales, and is it the outcome of social action. The analysis of localization is relative to the spatio-temporal conditions of social action, while the analysis of the processes of regionalisation refers to the production of space and time through social practices.

In the sense analysed above, the duality of space reflects the more general problem of the relation/opposition between action and structure in society.

4. The ambivalence of space: in-between materiality and metaphor.

A large part of what we usually call space (its forms, its meanings) is produced in the same way as social norms or material artefact are produced. Nevertheless the nature of cannot be satisfactorily defined in term of its cultural variations and its objectivity seems somehow to lie “outside society”. Intuition teaches us that physical space provides metaphors for social relations, which in turn influence perceptions of space (White, 1992). This circularity, not easy to describe, is at the centre of space definition.

Simmel has been the only sociologist to deal in a clear and explicit manner with the problem of the “presocial” definition of spatiality. He

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9 The influence of his conception in the contemporary Sociology of space has been very limited. For example, Antony Giddens’ very influential theory of the of spatio-temporal structuration ignores Simmels’ sociology of space. The absense of Simmel in Giddens sociology is for that matter not circumscribed to the space and time part of his theory. In the New rules of sociological method and in Capitalism and modern social theory Simmel sociology has been equally neglected. Quite oddly, however, one of Giddens’first writings in 1969 was an essay on
constructs his conception of space going back to Kant. According to Simmel space is a category of knowledge, but differently from Durkheim he sustains a relativist theory (based on the fact that there is no knowledge without a priori) which is not “based on common consent” (that is to say these a priori are somehow based on reality and are not the result of the agreement between knowing subjects). Spatial dimension is a logical and perceptive a priori. Unlikely Kant, Simmel’s a priori are not universal and a-temporal but variable in time and space (v. Boudon, 1989).

The fundamental property of space as an a priori is located, by Simmel, in the relational capability as the possibility of co-presence. Forms of interaction, emotions, types of association, fill space in different ways. Space is in fact, one of the “structural principles” of Simmelian sociology. It is a formal presupposition for social interaction. Since it is the sphere of coexistence, space is the starting point of society, embodying social relations. While Simmel shows how space is in some way socially formed, he does not treat space as simply a social construct. Space retains a reality of its own. Simmel’s position then, lies somewhere between spatial determinism and social constructionism (Lechner, 1991, 1986).

Space and time can be seen as an “anthropological universal”. Different cultures organise perceptive structures and experiences of space differently, but starting from a “material” characterising the human species in general. Working on space means to recognise the basic forms of organisation of experience constituting the common ground of cultural diversity. (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997; Dal Lago, 1994).

If we accept Simmell’s idea that the two sides of space are of a different nature we need a distinct way of relating them. This way can be found in the concept of ambivalence. This concept is used in sociology to refer to the mixed feelings people have toward an object, such as attraction or repulsion at the same time. Merton and followers locate core sociological ambivalence in
contradictory norms within a single role and status. In this sense it is related to the nature of modern society, characterised by change, variety and complexity\textsuperscript{11}.

In Simmel’s view, ambivalence is presented as the antagonistic tension in the interactive process (Nedelmann, 1992). Simmel’s dualism does not refer to the fact that the same element can be studied from two analytically different point of view (as a medium or as a result of social practices). It is instead related to the idea that this element can be understood only as the tension, the antagonism between two different tendencies. The essence of social life is, according to Simmel, in the coexistence of elements, tendencies, properties, which are, at the same time, opposite and deeply linked (dynamic antagonism). “Sometimes these opposed qualities or tendencies are seen as stemming from an originally undifferentiated unity; sometimes they are seen as joined together, so that a form is defined as a synthesis of opposites or as a midpoint between them; sometimes they are seen as varying inversely with one another. Often they are presented as only apparent contrasts, polarised dimensions of what is actually a more encompassing unity” (Levine, 1971, p. XXXV). The complex relationship between subject and object, public and private, conformity and individuation, freedom and constraint, antagonism and solidarity, is important to the understanding of different aspects of modernity. Sociability, monetary economy, the social life in the metropolis or marriage, can be explained in terms of these tensions.

Space’s double nature can be seen as a form of ambivalence related to the human condition and particularly expressing the dualism society vs nature\textsuperscript{12}. Dualism is indeed fundamental in the assessment of the nature of space, which is, at the same time, condition and symbol of social relationships.

\textsuperscript{11} Ambivalence has been considered as a form of modern life also because traditional cultures resolve ambivalence through transcendental categories and collective rituals, while modern societies face limited options on this field (Weigert, 1991).

\textsuperscript{12} Cfr. Weigert (1991). He proposes a general model suggesting that ambivalence is generated by value and cultural contradictions that are more fundamental than and complementary to social structural sources. He identifies four levels at which ambivalence can be expressed (Human condition, structural-cultural contradictions, situational contradiction and self contradiction). Human condition is defined through four different type of ambivalence: life and death, society and nature, culture and self and ambivalence deriving from the complexities of rational societies.
As a condition space is a presocial category, an a priori whose characteristics direct human relations. As a symbol, space is the metaphor of these relations. The nature itself of space can be found in the tension between a “geographical essence” (which is characterised by exclusivity, fixity, borders, nearness or distance and mobility) and its social meaning.

Moreover the themes of distance and proximity, separation and connection, boundary and openness, are central in Simmel’s sociological discourse.

The most well known example in the Sociology of space, is the Essay on the Stranger. In this essay Simmel describes the stranger as a social type which is the result of the tension between proximity and distance, migration and fixity. “In the case of the stranger, the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within the relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near” (Simmel, 1989, p. 143).

Another very important example, can be found in Simmel’s essay Bridge and Door. (Simmel, 1991) The examination of the differences between the bridge and the door, with its rich interplay of dimensions of connection and separation, outside and inside, unity and separation, are probably the most articulate account of dualism in Simmel’s sociology. In the case of the bridge, the human will to connection seems to be confronted not only by the passive resistance of spatial separation, but also by the active resistance of a special configuration. The door represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act. “By choosing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to designate them as separate, we have already related them to one another in our consciousness, we have emphasised these two together against whatever lies between them”.

5. **Concluding remarks**.

In this essay I have tried to analytically dismantle the very strong feelings of ambiguity related to the concept of space, identifying two different ways of dealing with the double nature of this concept. One possibility is to interpret this duality in terms of “individual” versus “society” founding the objectivity of space in the process of externalisation and objectification. Established in this way, the relationship between the two elements can be expressed through Giddens’ concept of *duality*. Another solution has been identified, in the opposition of “nature” versus “society”. The “external” and “constraining” nature of space lies, in this case, outside society. Simmel’s concept of *dualism or ambivalence* (tension between the opposing nature of two elements) is a more suitable idea of relating the two sides of space.

These two different accounts are not to be seen as opposed and alternative formulations of the same problem. On the contrary, the complexity of space can be understood only considering this “double level of dualism”. The ambivalence of space is actually due, not only to the fact that this element is (as are other aspects of society) a product of human activities and, at the same time, appears to have an objective nature lying outside individuals, but especially because, in this process of production, human activities are tensed between the possibility of human creativity and the constraining nature of human perception. While sociology is starting to be well equipped to deal with the opposition individual vs. society, the tension between nature and culture remains a quite underestimated subject in sociology.

Space has to be analysed, from this point of view, as a *form of experience*, for the way it mediates our relationship with social reality. (Mandich, 1996). Distance (as opposed to proximity) for instance, is not only a restriction to human activity but also a form influencing the properties of social relations. As Simmel has shown us, two links which are similar on all the other characters, are different inasmuch as the subjects are close (prevalence of sensoriality and emotions) or distant (prevalence of neutrality and abstractness). In the same way mobility and velocity modify the nature of relations and the connection to everyday world, affecting the way people
travel, meet and work, but also the way they dance, walk and think (v. Matoré, 1976, Virilio, ).

Central to the understanding of the human condition of experience is the concept of embodiment. This problem cannot be identified (like in the time-geographic approach) simply as a constraint over individual activities, given by the nature of the body and the physical contexts in which these occur. As has been quite often shown, there is a much more intimate relationship between space and body. Spatiality in fact takes root in the corporeality of human existence. Space develops for each individual as a topological and perceptive reality (Piaget et Inheler, 1972). Spatial representations are established starting from intuitions related to the body and movement. The most elementary spatial connection, proximity, is the mode of experience most related to the immediacy and corporeality of perception. Merleau-Ponty also shows how the body does not occupy space exactly as other material objects do, but it is the active centre orienting and organising space.

In traditional societies the bodily nature of spatiality can be immediately detected in the organisation of space. The authority in a pre-given, natural order rests, in large part, upon the taken for grantedness of not moving far beyond a natural organic body’s modes of making a day’s journey from its immediate spatial locale. The history of space, can be read as a progressive detachment from the organic limits of the body. City building first and technology latterly, create a transformed order, rendering space more abstract, fluid and artificial (Luke, 1996).

The recent upsurge of interest in cyberspace and cyberbodies, has again drawn attention to the bodily nature of human experience. The moment that space seems to be completely detached from its “material” nature (virtual space does not suffer the friction of materiality) the problem of its foundation in the corporeality of human existence arises. The literature on “postmodern

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13 Giddens’, discussion of space-time, starting from Heidegger’s concept of presencing is in the direction of a recognition of the nature of space-time as based on human corporeality. (Giddens, 1984, p. 32).
14 Merleau-Ponty reformulates the concept of intersubjectivity in terms of intercorporeality. Human intersubjectivity, is an intertwining of «flesh», an overlapping of sentient-sensible beings (Crossley, 1994). Intersubjectivity is based on partecipation in «intermundane space» which does not belong to us as such but to which we ourselves belong as visible beings.
society” (Jameson, Harvey,) deals exactly with the problems related to the way space and time modifications affect human experience. What is very often interpreted in terms of disorientation, inability to control the new abstract and technological space has probably to be more deeply analysed considering embodiment as a form of spatial experience which is product of the tension between space as a condition and as a symbol in the social production of space. The understanding of this tension is an unavoidable task towards a “phenomenology of experience” of the kind Simmel has contributed to develop” (Featherstone and Frisby, 1997).


Jameson, F. (1990) Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism, Durham, NC; Duke University Press.


Piaget J. e B. Inhelder (1972) *La représentation de l'espace chez l'enfant*, Paris, PUF.


