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Distance matters: mobilities and the politics of distance

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ABSTRACT

Distance constitutes one of the foundations of geographical discourse, and yet it is among the least discussed of these foundations. Rather than contemplating distance as an explanatory tool, the paper takes distance itself, as well as its development and implications, as requiring explanation in their own right. It looks at the role played by definitions and measurements of distance in the production of territory and private property in land; in the governing of moving bodies; and in the phenomenological and affective design of space. The paper's main argument is that distance should be de-constructed and re-politicized by being brought back into the field of mobilities.

Introduction

Distance constitutes one of the foundations of geographical discourse in general and of human geography in particular, and yet it is among the least discussed of these foundations. Distance belongs to the conceptual core of the discipline, along with place, region, boundary and scale, to mention only some of the major concepts. Moreover, it seems that distance is that which defines almost all of the other concepts – or more precisely, that the latter are difficult to define without presupposing distance and measurable size. Debates over center and periphery, spatial influences, and modes of defining and demarcating regions are impossible to grasp without a concept of distance (distance from the center, distance between points, the range of the distribution of phenomena, and so on).

At the same time, there is hardly any scholarly discussion of the concept of distance itself, in stark contrast to the other abovementioned concepts – place, region, boundary etc. – which have accrued a substantial body of scholarship. Among the geographical articles and studies in which the word 'distance' appears in the title or as one of the keywords, there are very few that do not take distance as a self-evident, uninterrogated explanatory factor. Distance appears primarily in two contexts: firstly, in the context of 'distance decay' (cf. Taylor 1971; Fotheringham 1981) or the 'friction of distance' (Cliff, Martin, and Ord 1974), a model widely used in the 1960s and 1970s for analyzing spatial relations according to the gravity model in which the main variable is distance. Secondly, distance appears in the context of the 'death of distance' idea, which became fashionable in the mid-1990s with the rise of globalization and the internet (cf. Cairncross 2001; Friedman 2006), and which has since then been the object of myriad references and critiques (Morgan 2004; Rietveld and Vickerman 2004; Burrell 2016). In both cases, distance is handled simplistically; rather than being problematized, it is taken as self-evident, albeit elastic to some extent. The simplistic approach to distance is also indicated by its absence from most geographical dictionaries and lexicons.

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The current essay rethinks distance in light of the question of mobilities. The power of the new mobilities paradigm lies in its direct reference to the distance between A and B (Cresswell 2006), not as an abstract non-place (Augé 1995), but rather as a place encapsulating human significance, histories, and power relations (Cresswell 2010; Urry 2007). Thus, instead of taking distance as a pre-given, independent variable, across which people, goods, and ideas are 'on the move,' the mobilities paradigm enables us to question the very notion of distance, challenging its common reference as an abstract, natural, and measurable object. The paper, therefore, suggests that the mobilities discourse can contribute to our understanding of distance; and that a critical, relational, and political concept of distance is crucial for analyzing mobilities across time and space.

My main theoretical point of reference will be Claude Raffestin's *territoriality* as a theory of mediation (Raffestin 1980, 1984, 2012; Klauser 2012). Territoriality is the way in which *space* becomes a *territory* through human action and perception. Since we cannot have access to space 'as is,' it is always mediated through semiotic systems that gaze at the world, explain it, and produce it at the very same time (Raffestin 1984). Thus, mediators – means of communication, languages and sign systems, but also technologies, mapping practices and modes of knowledge – condition the modes of territoriality. Thinking with mediation enables us to explore the relationship between power and space through technologies, measurements, and language.

In this context, distance will be analyzed as a co-constitutive act between language, practice, and space, in a way that creates different territorialities. In other words, the definition of distance is inseparable from its uses and from what it wishes to explain. Mobilities, as modes of being-in-the-world, involve perceptions, experiences, technologies and power relations (Cresswell 2010; Bærenholdt 2012). They are both mediated and mediators; they territorialize, just as much as they take place in a pre-existing territory. Mobilities are made across *abstract distances* (measured in meters or miles); they are part of differential *distanciation regimes* (when certain populations are distanced in uneven ways, based on their movement patterns); and they constitute a variety of *phenomenological distances*, in which human experience and space are co-constitutive.

Following a short review of the appearances of distance in the geographical literature and in the new mobilities paradigm, the paper will analyze distance across three complementary lines: (1) 'the tyranny of the straight line,' asking how and why abstract distance measurements became the gold standard for understanding spaces and territories; (2) 'distanciation' as a political tool for controlling people's distances across space and time; and (3) 'phenomenological distance,' in which distances are not always measurable or contiguous, but rather based on experience, affect, and language. The paper's intention is therefore to re-materialize and re-politicize distance, by re-embedding it within mobilities.

Distance in geographical discourse

There are very few studies of distance not as an explanatory tool for other phenomena but as the focus of research. Distance has been suggested by Watson (1955) to be the central concept of geography. Location, distribution, spread – all of these may in his view be explained only through the uniform instrument of distance, making it the one factor that binds together all aspects of the study of space (both physical and human). Watson distinguishes between several types of distance: physical, measured in meters and kilometers; economic, measured in terms of the cost of traversing a given distance; temporal, measured in terms of travel time; and finally, social distance, about which – referring to residential patterns in mixed cities – he raises the question of whether it is physical distance that explains social distance or vice versa. Watson thus seeks to christen geography as the 'science of distance' and to base the entire discipline on this concept.

Almost a quarter-century later, Witthuhn (1979) refers to distance as an 'extraordinary spatial concept.' Equipped with studies on the psychological aspects of spatial behavior, the author adds to the abovementioned types of distance also distances deriving from spatial perception, or from emotions experienced in relation to it. For Witthuhn, the emotional and relational perceptions distort the 'real' and 'true' (that is, abstract and measurable) distances, as unfamiliarity with a certain environment (or

what he dubs 'spatial illiteracy') holds the risk of leading to an erroneous perception of the distance between places. The goal of geography, argues Witthuhn, is the enhancement of spatial literacy, as well as the production of mapping and metric systems for measuring relative distances based on cognitive and affective mechanisms.

Pirie's entry on 'Distance' for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (2009) addresses in detail the various types of distance: aerial ('crow-fly') distance; effective distance (which takes into consideration the actual route to be traveled and obstacles to be circumvented); distance measured in units of time, money or effort; and cognitive and affective distances. Finally, Pirie analyzes the appearance of distance in geographical discourse: from its role as an explanatory factor during the quantitative period of the 1960s, through the critique of the 'tyranny of distance' as a factor explaining the development of Australia and New Zealand in terms of their remoteness from Europe and the Americas (Sinclair 1961; Blainey 1966), down to the more recent discourse on the 'death of distance' (cf. Cairncross 2001). Despite the great detail it displays, this piece still lacks a critical discussion of the concept itself, its underlying presuppositions, and its political and philosophical significance.

Clearly, many human geographers over the last three decades have done an important work in challenging, nuancing, and complicating the rigid notion of distance – notably, though, without directly using that word. David Harvey (1989) analyzed space-time compression as part of technological and discursive transformations wrought by capitalist processes. The acceleration of commodities and information has destroyed the 'static and absolute space,' argues Harvey, bringing about 'an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life' (1989, 284).

A similar relational approach, linking space, time, and society, can be found in Doreen Massey's concepts of space-time (Massey 1992, 2005) and power-geometry (Massey 1999), with which she analyzes the world as relational and embedded in power relations. The 'speeding up' and 'spreading out' of the modern world alters the meaning of place and identity as communities and cultures fuse together in a process of globalization. However, since time-space change is an uneven process, the new time-space geography creates a highly contested landscape, in which some collections of people become closer to each other, while others are pushed aside, neglected, and imprisoned. Other references to the changing relations between time and space might include Virilio's (2006) *dromology*, Castells' (2011) *network society* and *space of flows*, and more.

As noted, however, these references rarely use the term 'distance,' preferring instead notions such as space, time-space, geometries or networks. One could argue that those concepts are interchangeable, hence whatever applies to 'space' might as well work for 'distance,' with no need for further critical inquiry of the latter. Alternatively, one may suggest that distance is a futile, irrelevant concept; nothing more than a representative of the old static and absolute space.

This paper assumes nevertheless that the concept of distance needs to be taken seriously, deserving the same analytical attention and rigor as other fundamental geographical concepts. Moreover, and contrary to conventional wisdom, its 'naturalness' is precisely what we need to explain. The current paper does not attempt to draw a full history of distance: neither its etymology and history as a concept, nor its genealogy of uses and measurements. My purpose here is much more modest, that is, to remobilize the concept of distance: to show how the common meaning of distance – as measurable and absolute – is only one interpretation of it, and that by retying it into the field of mobilities we may better understand both distance and mobilities.

Distance and the new mobilities paradigm

Mobilities as a field of research might be defined as the discipline of paying attention to the distance between points. If in 'classic' transport or migration geographies the content of the line between A and B would remain unexplored, then thinking through mobilities is meant 'to explore the content of the line that links A to B, to unpack it, to make sure it is not taken for granted' (Cresswell 2006, 2). Tim Cresswell makes an analytical distinction between *movement* and *mobility*, arguing that whereas

mobility is practiced, experienced, embodied, and imbued with meaning and power, 'movement can be thought of as abstracted mobility' (Ibid.).

Mobility is thus not only richer than movement but also assumed to predate it ontologically – and yet, it is the concept of movement that traditionally took precedence in the modern social sciences (turning mobilities into a 'new paradigm', born only in the late 1990s). The same can be said of distance: while distance understood as a practiced, experienced, and embodied phenomenon is ontologically prior to its abstraction as contiguous and measurable, it is the latter that came to take precedence in the modern era. Therefore, by re-mobilizing distance my purpose is to reintroduce its richness, human significance, and power geometries.

It seems, however, that the potential of the new mobilities paradigm to challenge common concepts of distance is yet to be realized. Mobility *across distances* is extensively studied, but distance in and of itself is usually not the focus of research. Long-distance flights and short-distance commuting; maintaining family connections over distance; shrinking distances by means of transportation and communication; social distances between differentially mobilized groups; and more. Distance is still 'recalcitrant' in the post-migration lives of migrants (Burrell 2016), for whom the 'tyranny of distance' is alive and kicking (Ley 2004). Research into local mobility in Sweden revealed that 'the friction of distance is still of great importance for most people in daily life' (Ellegard and Vilhelmson 2004). Ureta (2008) has analyzed the effect of distance on Chilean low-income workers' decisions whether 'to move or not to move.' Jonas Larsen's (2013) entry on 'distance and proximity' in the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* deals with social lives 'at-a-distance,' discussing human connections across large distances, reading their dialectics of connectedness and mobilities, and arguing that 'distances have never meant so little *and* so much, with the world getting smaller *and* larger at the very same time' (2013, 125; emphasis in original).

Distance is thus 'elasticized' by various means of movement and communication, yet mostly remains as a variable in the practice of mobilities or as the stage on which social phenomena develop and unfold. Some authors suggest renouncing distance altogether. Offner (2000, 172) puts it explicitly when suggesting that '[d]istance is no longer the relevant variable in assessing accessibility. Connectivity (being in relation to) is added to, or even imposed upon, contiguity (being next to)'.

Offner is referring to an abstract notion of distance, but what if we seek to redefine distance as co-constituted with human practices, *including* connectivity and mobilities? In that way, distance would not be separated from mobility, but rather an integral part of it. Instead of exploring how to 'overcome' distance, we can ask how distance is socially, bodily, and politically produced. The question is not whether distance 'means little' or 'means much' in the contemporary stage of time-space compression, but rather how different distances are created, and how they are mediated by – and serve as mediators of – world perceptions.

Claude Raffestin's theory of territoriality and mediation is of great importance here. Territoriality is the way in which *space* becomes a *territory* through human action (Raffestin 1980; Klauser 2012). It is a phenomenological approach, relying on Heidegger's (2008) ontology of human being-in-the-world, but extended from individual consciousness to social groups that act in space, producing and reproducing it. For Raffestin, 'Space becomes territory within any social relation of communication' (1980, 133; quoted in Klauser 2012, 111), and territory is thus 'an informed space' (Ibid.). Wittgenstein's famous phrase 'The limits of my world are the limits of my language', is followed by Raffestin's (1984, 141) claim that 'the limits of my territoriality are the limits of my mediators.'

Mediators are means of communication, information, languages and sign systems, but also technologies, modes of knowledge, and more: 'mediators condition both perceptions and practices. I am saying "condition" rather than "determine" because mediators (as instruments, symbols, codes or techniques) have their scope and thus their limits. The concept of territoriality invites the rediscovery of the significance of limits' (1984, 440). Thinking with mediation enables us to explore the relationship between power and space through technologies, measurements, and language (see also Latour 2005; Klauser 2017). We cannot have access to space 'as is'; it is always mediated through semiotic systems that gaze at the world, explain it, and produce it at the very same time (Raffestin 1984).

Concepts are also mediators. They shape – and are shaped by – knowledge and experience. They derive from – and at the same time condition – perceptions and practices. The definition of distance and its uses are therefore co-constitutive acts between language, practice, and space, in a way that creates different territorialities, depending on the chosen language. The following pages will discuss three types of distance, seeing them as part of co-constituted semiospheres (Raffestin 1986) of language, politics, and world: (1) abstract distances and the production of territories and private lands; (2) relative distances and the governing of moving bodies and goods; (3) phenomenological distances and the affective design of space.

The tyranny of the straight line: geometry-mediation and the making of territories and private lands

> The aeroplane is a machine, no doubt, but what an instrument of analysis! This instrument has unveiled for us the true face of the earth. For centuries, roads had been deceiving us … [they] avoid the barren lands, the rocks, the sands. They shape themselves to needs and run from stream to stream … We have elected to believe that our planet was merciful and fruitful. But a cruel light has blazed and our sight has been sharpened. The plane has taught us the straight line. (Antoine de Saint-Exupery 1939; quoted in Sartre 1984, 55)[1]

Published in 1939, Saint-Exupery's memoir *Terre des Hommes* is based on the author's experience as one of the pioneers of civil aviation, delivering air mail across the Sahara and the Andes. The quoted passage is quite telling, tying together *humans* (the pilot and the 'us' of people living on the ground level), *nonhumans* (the aeroplane, but also the rocks, the sands, and the streams), the *semio-sphere of language/knowledge* (the instrument of analysis, teaching us the straight line), *power/space* (the technology that enables humans to cross uninhabited spaces), and finally, *mobilities* (the straight line of the plane, the winding route of the roads).

Mobility, the seer, the seen, and the world are thus co-constituted in the act of flying. With the change of needs and practices – that is, from roads winding between waters, greens, and humans, to the straight line of the airplane – the world itself changes. Aviation has enabled, for the first time in history, achieving the modern dream of navigating the earth as one navigates the sea (see Bohannan 1966), when the straight line turned from an abstract idea to a tangible practice. The airplane, as a mediator, changes space itself from striated to smooth (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and its spatio-politics is therefore deeper than mere questions of speed and accessibility.

Clearly, the straight line has been 'discovered' or 'invented' hundreds of years before the Wright brothers. The straight line and the uniform, abstract measurement units (e.g. meters, miles) are the most common way of measuring distances in the modern world. Yet it is probably the least 'natural' form of spatial perception and representation. In everyday life, at any rate, most people think intuitively in terms of relational categories (time, convenience, cost) rather than in metric units (cf. Ankomah, Crompton, and Baker 1996; Ureta 2008; Larsen and Guiver 2013). What we need to explain, then, is not 'spatial illiteracy,' as defined for example by Witthuhn (1979) – i.e. how real distances are 'distorted' by human perceptions – but rather the opposite: that is, the purported transparency and naturalness of the Cartesian image of abstract space.

A significant body of work has been done on the geometrization of space, most notably by Stuart Elden, who, following Heidegger, Lefebvre, and Foucault – as well as through an extensive research into the birth of modern territory – has shown the process of spatial abstraction and calculability, and their relations to power (Elden 2001, 2004; 2006, 2013, 2017). There is a strong relationship between geometrics, geopower and geopolitics; 'Modern technology requires a view of space as mappable,' writes Elden (2006, 3), and 'modern politics is able to fully exploit this.' My intention is neither to repeat those arguments, nor to offer a new genealogy of the invention of perspectives and calculations. Rather, my purpose is to shed some light on the disjoining of mobilities from abstract, measurable distance.

In their study of residents' descriptions of their apartments in New York, Linde and Labov (1975) distinguish between two types, which they call 'map' and 'tour.' The first type abstracts the apartment: 'The girl's room is next to the kitchen'; the second type is more bodily and operational: 'you turn right

and come into the living room.' Their findings show that only 3% of the interviewees used the map type – all the rest preferred *walking* over *seeing*; *moving* over *picturing*. Michel de Certeau (1984) uses this study to suggest a short genealogy of maps. Medieval maps included only the tours (performative instructions chiefly concerning pilgrimages), the main stops one was to make, and distances calculated in hours or in days. With the rise of modern science, however:

> [T]he map gradually wins out […] it colonizes space; it eliminates little by little the […] practices that produce it. Transformed first by Euclidean geometry and then by descriptive geometry, constituted as a formal ensemble of abstract places […] The tour describers have disappeared. (Ibid., 121)

Historically, the first measurement units were imprecise, uneven extensions of body parts (cubit, digit, foot) or of time (the distance of a cigarette or of a two-day walk) (cf. Lefebvre 1991; Scott 1998). It is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that standard units were established: the meter was determined to be the ten-millionth part of the meridian distance between the earth's pole and the equator, and the nautical mile the equivalent of one minute of latitude. Abstraction and comparison play a crucial role in making it possible to standardize the gaze at different sites, giving sweeping preference to absolute space – amenable to mapping, surveying, and standardization – over the relational perspective, in which space cannot be considered apart from its practiced aspect (Beer 2016). What this historical development meant, however, was not only a transformation in the representation of the world, but also a radical shift in the way it is perceived. The world itself changes when it is looked at differently.

Abstract distances are distances divorced from everyday experience in the world. Moreover, it is, I would like to suggest, a transcription of *distance* (experienced, lived) to *size* (abstract, seen from an imagined, immobilized transcendency). The *distance* between A and B ties together the two points and brings to mind the journey taken between them. It assumes mobility and action. *Size*, on the other hand, is the description of immobilized, closed objects. The image of both territories and private lands is that of sizes rather than distances. The modern territory is based upon the assumption of contiguity, uniformity and unambiguous sovereignty. It is a legible, mappable and calculable space, seen from above centuries before the actual ability to fly was invented. Witthuhn has argued that '[t]he definition of linear distance reflects the history of human progress in imposing order upon the world' (Witthuhn 1979, 178). It is a specific kind of 'order,' however. As a tool of mediation, with social and political implications, it reads the world and produces it as legible at the very same time.

The 'discovery' of the straight line, as suggested by Saint-Exupery, is an early realization of the hitherto imagined – yet highly practical – ruler's point of view. The state's geographers and cartographers knew very well that most of the planet was barren and uninhabitable, but it was not *experienced* as such. The collision between the two forms of mobilities is also a collision between different mediators – and thus a collision between two territorializations and two worldviews. This confrontation of two kinds of human experience – the merciful and fruitful world, in which mobility is made between streams and villages, and the straight line revealing the rocks and the sands – exposed the abstraction's non-abstract face (that is, as experienced by a human being), thus making the airplane such a cruel instrument of analysis.

Distanciation: technology-mediation, population management and social stratification

> [F]ar from being an objective, impersonal, physical 'given', 'distance' is a social product; its length varies depending on the speed with which it may be overcome. (Bauman 1998, 12)

Technology is a way of acting in the world and upon the world. As a mediator, it transforms, translates and modifies the world; as a spatial mediator, it territorializes space, opening certain possibilities while closing others. The structuring, channeling, and management of mobilities are a form of technology. The management of mobility technologies – in its widest sense, from road infrastructures to passports, codes of automatic transport channeling, tracking and surveillance tools, space-measurement languages, and more – connects and disconnects, accelerates and decelerates, in a variety of ways.

As noted above, abstract distances are one way of mediating the world, and arguably the least 'natural' of all. Rather than measuring distance in meters and kilometers, most people tend to have recourse to what we may call 'use distance' (Handel 2009, 2014), which derives from the use value of space, not from its abstract, absolute and measurable value. 'Use distance' is calculated in relation to various kinds of cost: temporal (how much time is needed in order to get from point A to point B); economic (the cost of travel itself, the cost of time lost, and so on); physical (the degree of convenience of walking or driving); or affective (pleasantness, alienation, fear and so forth). These factors determine distances and the difference between 'near' and 'far' (cf. Ureta 2008; Pirie 2009).

Unlike abstract distances, however, the abovementioned factors can be submitted to dynamic and deliberate alterations. Whereas it is impossible to shorten or lengthen an absolute and abstract distance between two points (e.g. in meters), it is possible to do so with the other factors. A road available between two points shortens the route between them in terms of time and convenience, whereas a muddy, neglected area or a threatening environment that one tries to avoid will lengthen the route for those who must traverse them.

Having dealt in the previous section with the abstraction of distance and its disconnection from moving bodies, I would like to bring now the moving body to the forefront. By distanciation I refer to the active production of differentiated distances as a means of spatial management and control. Freedom of movement is a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Bauman 1998; Massey 2005).

In recent years there is an escalating awareness to the role of infrastructures in that inequality (Graham and Marvin 2001; Rodgers 2004; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Since moving and acting are practically synonymous (Bauman 1998, 70), distanciation as I define it here is the active action upon people's lives and activities, by means of differentiated mobility. Written or unwritten laws that restrict the mobility of women; movement restrictions on migrant workers and refugees; roads designed to serve one population and not the other – all of these alter both the distance between different points and the experience of crossing that distance. The point will be illustrated with a brief discussion of roads and the ways they reshape distance, society, and politics (see also Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012).

'The benefits that roads bring to rural areas,' argues Fiona Wilson, 'are often seen as so obvious in the development literature that they are listed rather than discussed' (Wilson 2004, 525). Roads are usually regarded as a technology that serves to 'compress' distances between different points, but they also have the power to stratify and separate different populations (Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). As such, roads are patently political products and instruments.

Most studies examine transportation infrastructure from economic and quantitative standpoints, and consecrate speed and investment in roads. More recently, however, several critical studies have also been published, which expose the politics of roads, the way in which they are deployed as an instrument for the territorialization of the state, for the management and channeling of human movement in space, and for privileging certain populations over others (cf. Graham and Marvin 2001; Lucas 2004; Wilson 2004; Hine 2009; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Pullan 2013).

In what follows I provide a brief discussion of the political economy of distance production via road infrastructure, consisting of four dimensions: longitudinal acceleration; latitudinal deceleration; vertical separation; and the creation of time-space networks. It is intended to show how distanciation serves to make certain groups closer to each other by all means, while distancing and separating others. If distances are measured in everyday life by time, cost, or affect, then changes in these factors change distance itself. This is what makes the difference between 'near enough' and 'too far,' and consequently the difference between 'to move' and 'not to move' (Ureta 2008). Moreover, when applied on a large scale, distanciation produces differential space-time layers that create and separate communities.

Longitudinal acceleration is the taken-for-granted of roads, their very *raison d'être*. A road shortens the distance between its two ends on scales of time and cost. Roads connect between preferred points; in this way, they not only improve the accessibility of certain predetermined localities, but also create a relative delay for their surroundings (Graham and Marvin 2001; Handel 2014). In addition to the basic difference that roads introduce by their very existence, a difference is also created between different

users of the same road, namely between those driving a private vehicle and those who need to use public transportation.

In Israel, for example, 42% of the households have no private vehicle at all, and another 43% have only one car. In the latter case, only one person can use the car on a regular basis – usually the male family member. No wonder, then, that a study by the Bank of Israel has indeed revealed that the construction of roads resulted in a 10–14% increase in male salaries, whereas female salaries remained unchanged (Bassok and Levy 2008).

Beyond the differential accelerations and connections, there is another way in which roads affect movement, that is, by *latitudinal deceleration*. The road itself constitutes an effective barrier hindering the movement of human beings and animals wishing to cross it. Sometimes the result is only a slow-down (as in the case of pedestrians waiting for the traffic light to turn green), sometimes a certain detour is required (to the closest bridge going over the highway), and sometimes a full partitioning of space is involved. Hence, constructing a road produces a double distanciation: acceleration and bringing closer along the traffic route, coupled with deceleration and distancing perpendicular to it (that is, between its two banks).

Netz (2004) uses the term 'topological inversion' to denote situations where the lines connecting different points to each other become lines that detach and separate different planes from each other. The West Bank is a classic example of this phenomenon. Whereas Jewish settlements are connected with wide, fast, and well-lit roads, these same roads are prohibited for Palestinian use, and crossing them is often forbidden as well (Weizman 2007; Bishara 2015). Even in cases where no formal prohibition exists, Palestinians refrain from approaching many roads for fear of harassment by settlers or security forces.

In this sense, some settlements in the middle of the West Bank are close to Jerusalem or Tel Aviv (tens of kilometers away) because they are connected with a wide and fast road, whereas an olive grove located several hundred meters away from a Palestinian village but on the far side of the same road will be distant from the village and inaccessible for the latter's inhabitants. Thus, the very lines that connect also function as lines that disconnect, bringing about a spatial inversion when the majority is blocked by the minority due to the latter's transport infrastructure (Pullan 2013; Handel 2014).

Moving from the single road to the network, modern planning is organized around the question of movement and the desire to 'increase speed (and save time) by prioritizing the faster means of movement,' and that this prioritization usually includes *vertical separation* (Sorkin 2005, 1–2). In order to prevent the delays stemming from the need to enable movement for everyone (for even if preference is given to car traffic, pedestrian traffic must still be made possible), separation into different spatial levels is a common practice. The three-dimensional network (as an extension of the 2D single road) gives preference to those that are already rapid as it is, accelerating them (and shortening their distances) even more.

A classic example is taken from Robert Moses's planning of traffic systems in the Long Island area. Planning wide bridges that would connect wealthy neighborhoods to public parks and beaches, their purpose was not to cross rivers or natural obstacles, but rather human obstacles, namely the roads leading to poorer neighborhoods. In order to avoid the delays involved in coordinating the traffic at a two-dimensional intersection, Moses created a direct and rapid connection between the white, wealthy neighborhoods and the parks and beaches, bypassing the rest of the space around it. Moreover, the bridges' height was only 2.7 m above the roads running below them. Moses's purpose, according to Langdon Winner (2010), was to prevent buses (whose average height is over 3 m) from passing under the bridges, knowing that most public transportation users are blacks from poorer neighborhoods. Thereby, under the guise of professional and neutral planning, a distancing of unwanted populations from public space was enacted.

This brings us to the last point, which is the creation of *time-space layers*. Throughways are unequal acceleration lanes. In this sense, they not only serve as an instrument of social stratification, but due to their spatial and systemic character (for transport infrastructures are always part of a network), they split a given space into different spatio-temporal layers. Analyzing the phenomenon of gated communities in Managua, Dennis Rodgers describes the growth of relatively small gated communities

dispersed over numerous places across the city. With the massive support of the municipality and the government, a highway network linking the various communities (while circumventing the poorer or pro-Sandinista neighborhoods) was laid out, such that in effect a single, city-wide system was created. According to Rodgers:

> It is the interconnection of these privately protected spaces that constitutes them as a viable 'system', and it can be contended that the most critical element that has permitted the emergence of this 'fortified network' has been the development of a strategic set of well-maintained, well-lit, and fast-moving roads. (Rodgers 2004, 120–121)

Throughways thus alter and distort the 'clean' view of abstract space. The highway network creates two parallel systems: one is cohesive, connected, and rapid; the other is made up of distanced islands and characterized by slow, insecure movement between those islands. In this way, differential distanciation splits one *space* into distinct *territories* (in Raffestinian terminology).

The discussion of roads and networks attempted to show not only the elasticity of distance, but rather the role of *active distanciation* and its social and political implications. Whereas connectivity or accessibility might be perceived as a binary on/off choice – connected or disconnected – thinking with distance as a relational, co-constitutive concept ties together space, its experiences and uses, and allows us to develop a dynamic continuum of proximity. It is not distance as opposed to network and connectivity; to the contrary, it is a mobilized, dynamic, socialized and politicized distance that embodies them altogether. There is a variety of technologies involved in human and nonhuman mobilities – throughways, means of transportation, regulations and codes. All of which serve as mediators; they distance and territorialize differentially, thus effecting and conducting people's lives, experiences, and actions.

Distance as a problem, or as the basic human condition? Phenomenologically mediated distances

After examining the appearance of the straight line and abstract distance in the paper's first section, and delving into active distanciation as a means of control in the second section, the discussion now turns to the human phenomenological experience of distance. Whereas the former distances have been more or less measurable (by meters, time or money), comparable, and ordinal – meaning that one could say that a certain distance is shorter or longer than the other – phenomenological distances are non-ordinal (or more-than-ordinal) and non-measurable (or rather more-than-measurable). In the same vein, the mediation languages and practices involved in them would be much more complicated and nuanced: neither abstraction through geometry, nor distanciation by a limited set of transportation technologies and 'legitimate means of movement' (Torpey 1998), but rather distances mediated by a variety of languages, emotions, and worldviews. Those distances might appear more philosophical than geographical. Yet thinking through mediation and relationality is intended at annihilating the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (see Elden 2004), as human-significant distances are made of world, language, and technology.

Heidegger's (2008) notion of being-in-the-world, and his criticism of the abstract, measurable world, are important for understanding phenomenological distances. Human beings deal with the world not as an abstract grid of coordinates, but rather in a lived, experiential way, acting in – and reacting to – space according to notions of closeness and remoteness. A fundamental activity of *Dasein* is that of 'de-distancing' (*Entfernung*), which denotes the diminishment of distance, inducting things into the consciousness of the human being existing in the world. It is an activity of spatial appropriation. The 'proximate' is that which is ready to hand, whereas the 'distant' represents the alienated and the unavailable. Distance reveals itself in the act of its abolishment, as that which still lies 'outside.'

Distances, in this sense, are not necessarily contiguous. Distances may perform 'leaps' in accordance with one's intentionality and the degree of readiness-to-hand, creating 'islands' of 'near' (that is, de-distanced) and 'far.' One may feel closer to a 'distant' place, and the other way around. Frello (2008) shows, for example, how distances are constructed discursively through several case-studies. In one case, a slave descendant is finding her familial roots, creating a proximity between Denmark and the

West Indies through a 'discovery' of self-identity. Another case shows how Nørrebro – a neighborhood in central Copenhagen populated by a high percentage of ethnic minorities – is constructed in the common discourse as 'far away.' In the first case, a former colony, thousands of kilometers away, becomes 'near'; in the latter, a neighborhood in the city center is perceived as 'distant.'

Those distances are clearly not abstract or measurable ones, nor are they dependent only on time or travel costs. What they involve is a relationship between subject and place. If 'near' and 'far' signifies the 'degree of taming, domestication and familiarity of various fragments (human as much as inhuman) of the surrounding world' (Bauman 1998, 23), then the active production and management of distance bears great human significance, and distances are always socially constructed and political.

Distanciation, therefore, may be applied not only through 'hard' means, such as infrastructures and material mediators, but also by 'soft' means such as affect and discourse. Returning to Heidegger, we may apply some of the tools with which he analyzes time to distance (as the practice and experience of distance always involving both space and time). Time, argues Heidegger, is only felt when its regular, flowing movement is disrupted. Among other things, he makes a distinction between two kinds of such ruptures: suspension and emptying. Being stuck in suspended time (*hingehaltenheit*) is a situation characterized by forced waiting, which brings about a 'waste of time'; emptied time (*leergelassenheit*) refers more to loss of the meaning of time and of one's sense of control over it.

In the same manner, we may speak of *distanciation as suspension* (when distanciation works to the disadvantage of people who are delayed and are forced to waste their time waiting), or as *emptying* (when the space is devoid of human meaning). When one's road is lengthened beyond one's control, not only the destination is distanced, but also the road itself, as it symbolizes the enforced act of distanciation that makes both time and space redundant and 'uncomfortable'. An emptying happens when one's road is emptied of human significance, and the physical movement does not de-distance the crossed space which remains part of the abstract exteriority. Consider, for example, Michel Houellebecq's critique of the architecture of airports and malls:

> Contemporary architecture is at its best when it establishes sites so functional that they disappear from view. It is therefore a *transparent* architecture. Since it is charged with the task of enabling rapid movement of people and commodities, it tries to reduce space exclusively to its geometrical dimension. […] In this way, it enables the human being […] to fulfill the goal of his movement by a maximal reduction of friction, uncertainty, and waste of time. (Houellebecq 1999; original emphasis)

The transparent architecture is designed to enable smooth movement and to reduce distances. At the same time, however, it creates an alienation; it distances the place itself, reducing it to its geometrical dimension. The situation described by Houellbecq is an illustration of Harvey's (1989) notion of 'annihilation of space by time' (see also Massey 2005). Harvey argues that the need for 'efficiency' – that is, for reduction of the time of economic interactions (material and nonmaterial) – leads to an ever-increasing time-space compression, in which space becomes transparent and meaningless. In transparent architecture, abstract spaces remain the same, while time-space distances are compressed and human-phenomenological distances are enhanced. The distances that are enhanced are not distances from A to B, but rather it is the space itself that is distanced from the humans dwelling in it. It creates a spatial leap, in which a certain point may be close to me, but the way there remains 'in distance.'

Formulated somewhat differently, it may be argued that distance in Heideggerian terms equals boredom. Distance is an uninteresting movement through meaningless space. Thus, it presents the complementary side of the abstraction of space, which is its human-phenomenological consequences. In contemporary neoliberal systems, overriding importance is attached to access and to economic activity in the broad sense of the term, as a rational, goal-directed form of human activity. The time spent on movement between places is lost time, and therefore distance itself becomes a problem – a bothersome and superfluous factor that should be reduced and eliminated as much as possible. This regime of accessibility, connectivity, and efficiency constructs distance as a problem to be overcome, yet by the same action of abstraction and time-space compression it re-creates distances by emptying the significance of both space and time.

What the current discussion is adding, however, is the dialectics of distances. There is distance as boredom, but also its opposite, that is, distance as desire. These dialectics of de-distancing and distancing create counter-movements in which people seek distance. Larsen and Guiver's (2013) analysis of tourists' perceptions of distance has shown that the latter may be an experience in and of itself. Firstly, people did not seek to arrive at their destination as quickly as possible, but rather considered the distance as part of the experience. Mobility itself has been described as part of the vacation (think, for example, of round-trip cruises, where the holiday is mobility). Secondly, distance has been described as desirable when perceived in terms of environmental and cultural differences between the tourist's origin and destination. It is a play between several notions of distance, ordinal and zonal alike,[2] when sometimes the distance means 'not here,' or 'opposite of home,' whereas at other times it is measured by time, money or collected experiences. Larsen and Guiver thus argue that 'distance in itself sometimes becomes an attraction for tourists and a driver for tourism mobility' (2013, 974).

What is desired is the experience of de-distancing the distance. In this case, distance manifests itself not as estranged from human experience, but rather as an act of dwelling in the world. We should note, however, that the desire for distance wishes to de-distance it without annihilating it altogether. It does not seek to make the distant identical to the proximate; rather, it is a de-distanciation that *preserves* the distance, as distance is a precondition for desire itself. The unattainability of something wanted or needed is what creates the longing for it, and spatial dynamics – not too near, not too far – are what create the suspension as temptation. Albert Camus' (1955) discussion of Don Juan as a case study of desires suggests that the arrival at the object of desire and the fulfillment of that desire only make it necessary to find a new object and create a new distance, as sometimes desire itself is the desired thing.

We may also think of distance as the basic human condition. Not only between the individual *Dasein* and the world, but also as a socio-philosophical phenomenon. Peter Sloterdijk's ontological phenomenology further develops the question of being to the question of *being-together*, and is significantly based on questions of proximity and distance (Sloterdijk 2011, 2014, 2016). Humans, in Sloterdijk's thought, are 'creatures of distance' (Elden and Mendieta 2009, 5), whose life begins with the experience of exile from the womb, and proceeds only due to the generosity of others around them. Humans are dependent on other humans, yet are never able to annihilate the distance between Self and Other. Humans are in distance from themselves, from others and from the world. The world is therefore never fully de-distanced, but the movement of distance and across distance never stops.

Distance as the human condition seems to find its quintessential articulation in the work of Franz Kafka. Here it is a matter, not of temptation, where distance is eventually overcome – or at least the potential of overcoming it always exists – but of a distance that will forever remain impossible to cross. Be it the distance from the castle, from the far side of the gateway to the law, or from the dominant father – this kind of distance is essentially a theological one, creating hierarchies and power geometries.

Proximity and distance between human beings may be understood as an inherent human experience, yet they have historical, sociological, and geographical variations – i.e. they are socially constructed and political. Societies and political institutions are based on relations of distance, proximity, and movement (cf. Simmel 1903; Allen 2000; Jensen 2006), and distances are altered as political means of control and resistance. Hatuka (2016), for example, analyzes distance as a key factor in civil protests, in relation to the perceived distances between the government and the public on the one hand, and among people in the public space on the other. Authorities use distance as an instrument for establishing order and hierarchy, both in discursive and in planned-physical spaces, whereas protesters negate the socio-spatial order by challenging practices and meanings of distance (as manifested, for example, in social and physical 'proximities' between protesters in the various 'occupy' movements in 2011).

Spaces are thus mediated through physical planning, power hierarchies, ideas of solidarity, and more. Those mediators of socially constructed experience produce distances: between places, between people, between ideas. Human beings are creatures *of* distance and *in* distance. Understanding distance is therefore crucial for understanding human dwelling and action in space as individuals and as social groups.

Conclusion

> [T]he issue of the conceptualization of space is of more than technical interest; it is one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world. (Massey 1992, 67)

Deep critical thought about the spatial state of affairs on all scales needs to start with a revision of the basic concepts that we use. Language is not only a tool for describing reality; it enables and limits action within this reality. Language is the medium in which critical thought and political action themselves take place. Therefore, every analysis of a concept involves a reflection upon its cultural, historical, and political conditions of production. Opening the political and geographical lexicon itself to debate is a crucial moment in opening the social and political imagination to new options.

This paper sought to critically rethink distance as part of a political geography of mediation, requiring 'a systematic focus on the mediating tools, values, ideas, etc., shaping and underpinning the exercise of power in interaction with space' (Klauser 2017, 163). It did so by shedding light on the social and political nature of distance in several, mutually complementary aspects.

First, the geometry-mediated abstract distance that gives preference to contiguous, abstract, and measurable territories and private lands. Second, a technology-mediated *distanciation*, namely, a dynamic activity of stratifying and separating populations by factors such as speed, accessibility, and various types of cost. Finally, phenomenological distances, in which distances are constructed as part of human experience. These are noncontiguous distances, in which a 'distant' place may be 'near' and the other way around. Boredom, interest, uncertainty and care become factors of distanciation no less than roads and means of transportation. Humans are creatures of distance – and living in distance as desire, fear, or a form of self-identity is therefore part of what it means to be human.

Distance in this paper has been re-mobilized. Instead of a frozen and abstract object, detached from the experience of crossing it, distance has been presented as relational, meaningful, social and political. Attention to distance is attention to the in-between – the way between A and B – not as a particle in a scopic regime, but rather as part of an experienced mobility. In contrast to Marc Augés conceptualization of in-betweens – from motorways to airports and terminals – as archetypal non-places, Una McGahern (2017) has coined the concept of 'in-between place,' identifying the significance given to in-betweens by their users. Those places possess a temporary constellation of social relations, constructed by meetings, shared experiences, and various mobilities (see also Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012).

In the abstract image of straight lines and contiguous spaces, where size replaces experienced distance and the whole territory is considered in terms of sovereignty or ownership, the in-betweens are as abstracted as the points lying in their ends. In the condition of neoliberal super-modernity, the in-between is considered as a superfluous 'waste of time' and as a non-place (Augé 1995), creating a 'distanced, dislocated and depoliticized view of a blurred and anesthetic landscape' (McGahern 2017, 94). Taking mobilities seriously, however, not as abstract movement, but rather as part of 'a meaningful world of social space and social time' (Cresswell 2006, 5), reveals how mobilities themselves produce spaces as meaningful, thereby reterritorializing them as in-between *places*.

Describing Palestine's spatial state of checkpoints, restrictions, fear and alienation, Bassam Almohor (2014) explains his insistence on walking: 'I walk because my country is small – getting smaller, shrinking and vanishing. It is being fragmented, scattered into pieces, disconnected, or connected with thin, narrow corridors. I walk to make it big again.' Walking in Palestine defeats geopolitical scales and definitions, resists the alienation and abstraction, and makes the territory big again. Re-mobilizing distance is therefore literally a production of space: a necessary step for removing its façade of geometricality, uncovering its politics, and making it human again.

Notes

1. The translation was slightly revised by the author, in accordance with the original French. The book had been translated to English, as *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939). The English version, however, is significantly different from the French one, and doesn't include the quoted paragraph.

2. Larsen and Guiver differentiate between two types of distance: 'zonal' – in which distance signifies a dichotomous separation between 'here' and 'not here,' and the quantitative measure has no relevance – and 'ordinal' (following Tobler 2004), which, though not clearly measurable, may still be considered in terms of degrees of 'close,' 'less close,' 'far,' 'further,' and so on.

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