

Representations of Place

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Introduction

Human Geography is a discipline that has a tightly bound relationship with space and place. The discipline is built on the premise that the spaces and places around us have a vital influence on our lived experience: different places influence how we act, how we feel, and how we relate to others. Consider, for example, how you act and feel at school, compared to being at home, or in a strange place on holiday. In each case, the signs, symbols, and cultures of a place influence our sense of belonging, they influence our emotions, and our practices. The places and spaces around us influence who we are.

Findings

Scales, Experiences, and Representations of Place.

Places can occur at a range of scales. We could consider the place of your room at home, your street, or your school yard; we could consider the 'place' of your neighbourhood, your town, or your region. Similarly, we could consider the scale of the nation as a 'place'.

We might experience these various scales very differently. At the local level, we may understand the nature of places through our direct experience; we may notice different signs or symbols which influence our behaviour (e.g. material signs which say 'Keep off the Grass!', or signs we put up on our bedroom doors which tell others to 'Keep Out!'). But we can also be influenced by the cultural behaviours of others (e.g. we respect the more 'taken for granted' assumptions about a place, so we don't shout in a church, even though there are no signs which actually forbid this behaviour). At scales beyond the local we may not know what places are like because we have not experienced them for ourselves. In these cases, we rely on 'representations' of place which inform us about them.

Representations of places and spaces stand in for our direct experience, and come to influence the commonly held assumptions and expectations about what that place may be like. Representations of place come in many forms: from social media platforms, TV

programmes, films, adverts, or even music. All these cultural forms influence how we may think and feel about different places. A common example of such representations may be national anthems. Although we live in a particular country, we know most about our 'place' at the local scale. A sense of place at the national level may be formed through lyrics and words which suggest to us what the 'national character' may be like, or what the physical geography of a place may be.

Such representations may not be wholly accurate. They may seek to 'paint' a place in a favourable light, be attractive to certain groups, or conceal particular aspects of a nation. If they are effective, however, they will be commonly accepted, and generate a sense of loyalty or deep attachment from a citizen to a place. In this way, the existence of the nation-state is deeply rooted in the potency of its shared symbols, concepts and representations and is the core of a sense of collective pride and patriotism.

Imagined Communities.

According to Ben Anderson (1983), the place of the nation is constructed through such representations. As a result, any nation is not real in the sense that local places are – experienced directly by those who live there – rather than are 'imagined' into being through representations. In this way, we may share a sense of kinship with people we have never met and live hundreds of miles away from, simply because we 'imagine' ourselves into a community which shares the same representations. For example, consider how you feel when your national anthem is played at a sporting occasion, and how a sense of belonging is felt by many people as the music plays. This sense of solidarity joins people together and forms a sense of collective identity.

As representations can help generate identities of people and places, can they help to challenge outdated or stereotypical representations about places at the national scale too?

Representations of Place: Case Study

Welsh Tourist Adverts:

When thinking of Wales, what is the first 'representation' that comes into your mind? Is it Rugby? Daffodils? Sheep? Gavin and Stacey? Dragons?

Conceptions of place are constantly shifting as historical representations give way to new cultures and traditions. In an attempt to influence how the nation of Wales is understood by others, *Visit Wales* undertook a marketing campaign to represent Wales in a new way. In a bid to present Wales as a 21st century tourist destination, *Visit Wales* has branded the country as a place of adventure, physical beauty, and legend.



Visit Wales have sought to represent the geographical, cultural and historical aspects of Wales in a new way. To this end, *Visit Wales* released their 'Year of Legends' story in 2018 in order to present the country's beauty and potential for adventure. Their adverts such as 'Year of the Sea'

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ST6lgOc0Yc>)

and 'Luke Evans: zips in for an adventure'

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAaRcx9dhzU>)

use powerful imagery of the scenery to evoke emotions in audiences that may not have previously been associated with Wales. This is aided by the use of poignant language such as "This is Wales" and "Epic", which connects contemporary physical landscape to pre-modern mythologies and heroic activities. The message appears to be: if you come to Wales, you can have a mythic adventure too!



Further Activities

- Consider some places that you are familiar with: what signs and symbols influence behaviour in these places? How does conforming with these rules influence what these places are like? How does the place change if people don't conform to these rules?
- Consider how places are 'represented' at the national scale. What types of representation can you consider (e.g. anthems, flags, tourist adverts) and how effective do you consider them to be?
- Watch the *Visit Wales* films through the links in this document. What ideas about Wales are being promoted here? How successful do you think they are? Do they change how you think about Wales? What other versions of Wales are being overlooked or even silenced through these representations?
- If you were going to create representations for your own town (or other 'place'), what might they include, and why?

References

Anderson, J. 2022 Understanding Cultural Geography. Routledge: London. See also

<http://www.spatialmanifesto.com/geography-place-culture>

Anderson, B., (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London.