Boundary, Place, and Event in the Spatiality of History
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In this commentary on Philip Ethington’s essay, I focus on the importance of boundary as a basic parameter of the spatial dimensions of history. I also emphasize the relationship between place and event in understanding these same dimensions. In these ways and others, I agree with Ethington’s overall thesis as to the inherent spatiality of history; my effort is to specify further some of the precise ways in which this is the case.

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I have profited immensely from reading Philip J. Ethington’s provocative essay on ‘Placing the Past.’ In a series of deftly drawn and wide-ranging moves, the author takes the reader from a consideration of the temporal basis of history to a set of reflections on historical actions as place-based. Along the way, he provides a review of a basic theories of time and space, including discussions of the difference between natural versus lived time as well as metaphoric space. In these brief comments on this rich and provocative work, I will focus on two issues: that of boundary and the event–place relation.

I

The turning point of the essay occurs in the treatment of Georg Simmel, whose seminal status for the rethinking of history (as earlier of sociology) is convincingly maintained. Ethington shows that Simmel’s emphasis on the grounded character of social interaction leads to a focus on boundary as a
truly pivotal category. He singles out this sentence of Simmel’s: “By virtue of the fact that we have boundaries everywhere and always, so accordingly we are boundaries” (Simmel 1971, p. 353, italics in original). I take this to be a truly remarkable claim. It points to a species of edge as inherent to human interaction, thereby suggesting that the most important arena of action is not in the center of the stage but at the periphery—or better, peripheries, as there is always more than one kind of edge in a given circumstance. Rather than being the zone in which human action gives out or comes to an end, the boundary is precisely where it intensifies: where it comes to happen in the most effective or significant sense.

More important still for Ethington’s thesis, the boundary as creative edge is the place where time and space join forces: it is the region where we can no longer distinguish between these two parameters in any strict way, being the very region where they merge. Thus a boundary is something that is not just ‘geometrically and metaphorically spatial’ (in Ethington’s phrase) but inseparably temporal as well. Simmel’s own celebrated analysis of ‘The Door,’ not here mentioned by Ethington, is a striking case in point: not only do people meet at a door, they meet there in ways that are specifically spatial and temporal. If I knock on a door and someone answers, I and that other are suddenly conjoined in time and space. Our very confrontation at the doorstep is spatio-temporal, and it is all the more so if I step over the threshold to enter the house: my bodily movement inescapably occurs in space as well as in time. Indeed, my very body, stationary or moving, is bi-dimensional in the same way.

In the wake of Simmel, I would want to distinguish between ‘boundary’ and ‘border.’ Where the former is pliable and porous, allowing for two-way transmission of bodies across it, the latter is restrictive and foreclosing. A border is most frequently a definitional or cartographic or legal entity, and as such is designed to distinguish and keep apart: Mexico goes north to just this line, and the United States starts from the other side of the same line—which, in this particular case, is revealingly called ‘la gran línea.’ Where a boundary facilitates the movements of human (and other animal) bodies across it—think only of a mountain stream across which humans and other animals easily move—a border acts to impede. For this very reason, borders are more aptly described in purely spatial terms, as when they are mapped, or in sheerly temporal terms (as in precision clocking); whereas boundaries are equally receptive of spatial or temporal determinations—and, often, of both at once. Thus, when Ethington speaks of ‘the brutal boundaries of colonial exploitation,’ it would have been more accurate to say ‘brutal borders’ if my preferred terminological distinction were to hold.
I see boundaries in the sense I have just maintained as the crux in Ethington’s essay; not just because of Simmel’s signal recognition of them, nor only because of their distinctive differences from borders, nor even insofar as they combine spatial and temporal facets, but still more significantly because they demonstrate so tellingly that history occurs as place: which is nothing less than Ethington’s primary thesis. I could not agree more with this thesis, which I have striven to establish in my own way in Representing Place in Landscape Painting and Maps (Casey 2002, Epilogue). But now, spurred by Ethington’s recourse to Simmel and by my own recent research on the place of edges in human lives, I wish to inflect Ethington’s thesis by saying that boundaries are where places happen. If history is to occur as place, then it will do so most effectively in the boundaries that belong to places. In particular, it will occur mainly in the form of what I would like to call ‘boundary events.’ I say ‘mainly’ since I do not want to suggest that boundary events are the sole means by which history happens; but I would argue that they are the most formative such means—the most favorable medium, the privileged region. We see this happening in a broad spectrum of instances, ranging from the history of immigration (in which impassable borders all too often act to replace permeable boundaries) to that of warfare (think only of the seemingly endless wars in many parts of the earth), from the history of discrimination on the basis of race or gender (where the body surface, another form of boundary, is very much at stake) to that of whole nations (which are often defined in terms of their territorial edges). The list could continue indefinitely; the point, however, is straightforward: not only places but more especially the boundaries (and sometimes also the borders) of places serve as the matrix of historical action.

It follows that boundaries are to be construed in a manner that allows them to be eventmental. Rather than being determined in strictly spatial ways—as has traditionally been the case—I wish to maintain that such boundaries act as events in their own right. Moreover, precisely as such they are better able to be vessels for historical action than those vehicles that are described in exclusively spatial or temporal terms: for example, the ‘battlefield’ or the ‘historical occurrence’ taken as such. These latter are merely instrumental designators for something of deeper import—namely, the boundary event considered as a privileged vessel of historical process. The compound term ‘boundary/event’ has the merit of combining in one expression both a spatial and a temporal aspect—at least to the extent that the separate terms ‘boundary’ and ‘event’ are traditionally construed (i.e. as a boundary in space and an event in time). But in truth each term is bivalent: I maintain that a boundary is both spatial and temporal, and so is
event (which, as Ethington would insist, has to arise in a concrete place). Better said: each term is placial, where it is place itself that is indispensably spatio-temporal, ineluctably both at once. It follows that the expression ‘boundary event’ is placial twice over, reinforcing the inherent placiality of history—with a somewhat greater emphasis on space in the case of ‘boundary’ and on time in the case of ‘event.’ But since space and time themselves are creatures of place, these are only differences of nuance—of rhetorical stress rather than of conceptual substance. ‘Boundary event’ remains as a resolutely placial phrase, one that is integral to a re-construal of human history as place-bound and place-making.

In pursuing this last line of thought, I am in fact converging with one of Ethington’s most basic claims: ‘Events are places and vice versa.’ I am also in accord with his linking of ‘taking place’ with ‘making place.’ But in the wake of Simmel, I am placing more stress on boundary than does Ethington, despite his express acknowledgement of Simmel’s introduction of this term into late modern discourse. The difference between Ethington and myself at this level is not, however, trivial. My effort is to purge from the very idea of event and of place—from both at once—a tendency to consider the center, or middle, of either notion the primary scene of action. Instead of finding this scene on the central battlefield, I prefer to think of historical events as happening for the most part at the edges of the manifest action. For instance, early exploration and trade on the Mediterranean took place along the coast of the Mediterranean rather than in the middle of the sea itself. As Braudel argues, the practice of costagiere, that is, of sailing from port to port along the coast at the edge of the sea, was where the crucial action lay (Braudel 1972). The same holds for other, comparable historical events, and this is so even in the case of failed events, as with the Maginot Line in World War I. The sheer imagination of this Line as effective was sufficient to make it a significant boundary event—an event that was a place, and a place because a boundary.

II

Beyond this basic difference of emphasis, I have three quibbles with certain claims of Ethington’s. (i) First, is it true that ‘history must be about those places [that engender historical actions] if it aspires to recount the past’ (my italics)? I do not believe that a ‘placeful’ analysis of history—the term is Ethington’s—requires that the writing of history itself need expressly to focus on places per se. It is sufficient if the role of place is tacitly acknowledged as the source of historical actions themselves. For this acknowledgement to be effective, they need not be singled out as such.
(ii) I am skeptical of the merit of the project of ‘a vast multi-perspectival atlas of world history’ that is advocated by Ethington. By the time any such atlas were to be composed, I fear that the places it lists will have become (in my language) mere ‘sites’ that no longer serve as genuine places. (iii) A closely related claim is that history should aim at a ‘post-foundational universal’ by anchoring ‘dialogic reason’ to ‘universal, mappable criteria.’ Promising as it doubtless is, such a sense of the universal is nowhere spelled out, and the reader is left to guess at what it means more exactly: is it ‘abstract’ or ‘concrete’ (in Hegel’s contrast), ‘formal’ or ‘substantial’ (in Chomsky’s choice), or is it tied to the ‘singular’ (as Deleuze insists)?

III

The mention of ‘mappable’ in the passage I just cited above leads me to address a central contention of Ethington’s essay. This is the view that history requires not only the recognition of its placeful origins but their ultimate mapping. In his words, ‘[h]istory is the map of the past.’ Much as I value the activity of mapping and have pursued it in my own recent work, just here my questions begin to proliferate. (1) Why select mapping rather than writing—given that the latter, as Derrida has insisted, is itself as much a form of ‘spacing’ as is the drawing of maps? (2) Is it true that ‘[a]nything that cannot be mapped is beyond the event horizon of consciousness’? What of those modes of consciousness that are less than fully explicit—that are ‘pre-reflective’ or ‘pre-conscious,’ not to mention ‘unconscious’? Are they invalid or useless if they do not lend themselves to mapping? (3) Is it the case that ‘the way of knowing places is to map them?’ Much would here depend on the exact signification of ‘knowing.’ I would want to leave room for having a ‘sense of place’ that is not yet a form of determinate knowledge and that would resist conventional forms of mapping usually labeled ‘cartographic.’ (4) I agree that to accommodate the link between history and mapping, we must ‘expand the meaning of “mapping” very broadly,’ but the list given by Ethington seems to have no effective limit: ‘Maps represent the relationships among topoi, be they points, lines, polygons, or actions, events, experiences, and ideas.’ Surely mapping has to possess more specificity than any and every relationship between topoi—where topos ‘signifies the intersection of (lived) place-time and (natural) spacetime’—while also retaining traces of the Aristotelian sense of common argument-forms. In this instance, both ‘map’ and topos have come to signify so much that they are in danger of not signifying anything as such. (For my own distinction between four fundamental forms of mapping, see Casey 2005, Introduction and Epilogue.)
IV

My recommendation is to delimit the scope of these two major terms of Ethington’s analysis: map and topos. ‘Map’ needs to be liberated from its alliance with modern cartography so that it can resume its original sense of charting one’s way in a given place or region. Hence it can be something quite informal—indeed, anything that indicates a sense of direction and gives a basis for orientation. Construed in this way, mapping is place-finding, a term that is in the same league as place-taking and place-making. Similarly, topos has to be led back to its root sense in Aristotle’s Physics, where it is conceived as the most snugly fitting container of that which is held in place. But the basis of any such containment is precisely the boundary or border that acts to include what belongs to a given place—that surrounds it in an action of ‘having-around’ (periechon in Aristotle’s technical term for the character of the containing surface).

If these two acts of condensation and specification are carried out, Philip Ethington and myself will again, and finally, converge—above all, in the idea that history provides ‘a topology of the past’ (his italics). Certainly so: history investigates and describes the structure (the logos) of the particular places (topoi) wherein historical actions happen—and, more especially in those boundary places that act to generate historical events: which is to say, in certain particular boundary events. It is to be noticed that Ethington’s claim makes no explicit reference to mapping—and need not, unless mapping itself is reconceived. Thus in my view it is superfluous to add (as does the last sentence of the essay) that ‘Placing the past takes “the past” out of time, locates it in materialized topoi, and asserts that history, in any symbolic system, is the map of these topoi.’ I would rather say that once we place the past in discrete places, and fully recognize it there, we do not have to map these places out. We can leave it, glimmering, in these places themselves.

References

Casey, E.S. (2002) Representing Place in Landscape Painting and Maps, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
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