

History of Space

***A Plea for a History of Space Perceptions* (1991)**

Jean Robert

Is it possible to write a “history of space”? Is such an attempt justifiable? Doesn’t it amount to the pretension of historizing a “universal.” There are precedents. Foucault, of course, and his “historization” of sexuality.

I prefer to situate my attempt in reference to another, more modest precedent: the series of historical studies recently published by the *Fernuniversität* of Hagen, Germany. These studies successively attempt to historize labor, “the text,” money, literacy, and space perception.¹

The latter is my theme. I have to de-limit it. I am interested in the history of popular space perceptions. I do not deal with mathematical spaces, less with the conquest of “outer spaces.” I am little interested in the constitution of the conceptual frame-space of science, not at all in science fiction.

What I do:

- Attempt a “phenomenological” description of modern space, mainly after the introduction of motorized transportation: I study, for instance, the railroad mania of the 1840’s in England and the changes of perception that it fostered.
- Pinpoint some certainties through which modern men and women apprehend space.

¹These courses can be obtained at the following address: Dr F. Helms, FernUniversität - GHS - Postfach 9 40, D-58084 Hagen,

- Let these certainties in the wardrobe and travel to history.

Though they are flat and “superficial”—in the sense architecture theorists give to this term: reflected by “surfaces”—for the historian, modern certainties have a hidden historical depth. For instance, the writings of Ildefonso Cerdà echos our own certainties in a way that a distance of a century makes almost caricatural, a little as a Dolphin Water closet of 1880 looks today as a caricature of our flush toilets. Ildefonso Cerdà planned the first street cars of Barcelona and wrote a monumental *Teoría de la Urbanización*. Allow me to quote from this book, which represents the opposite of what I’m attempting:

The first task of the first man was to find a shelter. Then necessity led him to look for help and company; shelters were put into communication, and it is this process which constitutes urbanization.²

We recognize here implicit assumptions of modern planning:

- individuals have two main needs: to be housed and to be transported
- the provision of houses and their communication through transportation are the two tasks of urban planning.

A further hypothesis is implicit in this text:

- the needs of modern man are satisfied by institutions, while primitive man had to provide himself.

In other words, the hut is a forerunner of the modern apartment, walking and being transported are basically the same activity. For the author of this text, the history of all human settlements could be reconstructed from the knowledge of these two elementary needs: to be

Germany.

² Ildefonso Cerdà, *Teoría de la Urbanización*, Madrid, 1867. Facsimile edition Barcelona, 1967. French (shortened) translation: *La*

housed, to be transported. A human settlement is nothing else than

... the association of rest and movement, or rather, of spaces to rest and spaces for the motion of humans, that is of buildings and roads.³

To know it, we don't need to study the traces of the dead in old texts and ruins. Who will give us the necessary information over these times for which there are no witnesses? "... [A]nswer: man, his nature, his innate instincts, his needs."⁴

Man's nature makes of him, since ever a potential "commuter." Once accepted, that there is that "nature," with its corresponding "needs," history can be developed without break, in perfect continuity and harmony with our "certainties."

This continuity is in reality an illusion resulting from the projection of two certainties of industrial man into the past. The "history" which is thus written is a colonization of the past that serves to legitimize present institutions. What is called "urban planning" is founded on that falsification. It does not recognize the existence of radical breaks in the history of perceptions. The separation between home and work (and, perhaps more important, between home and soil), between a sphere of consumption and a sphere of production, waged labor as the condition of survival, belong to the certainties of modern existence, and these certainties in their turn take the concrete form of an organization of space.

The speed of transportation or the artificial climate of our houses are expressions of progress and development. At another level though, they are the mirrors of anthropological axioms about our "innate lacks." We falsify history, when we ascribe our needs to the dead. Few of us have ever built a roof over their head. The freedom of the historical poor to conquer a place in the

Théorie Générale de L'urbanisation, présentée et adaptée par A. Lopez de Aberasturi, Paris, 1979.

³ Ildefonso Cerdà, op. cit..

commons in one night is only known to us by hearsay. The modern poor can only claim to be billeted in planned square meters. He can put his name on the waiting list of the housing commission, he is not allowed to rehabilitate a ruined house in the old quarters of the city. Ivan Illich writes:

Both the Indian tribe that moves down from the Andes and the Chicago neighborhood council that unplugs itself from the city housing authority challenge the now-prevalent model of the citizen as *homo castrensis*, billeted man. But with their challenges, the newcomer and the breakaway provoke opposite reactions. The Indios can be treated like pagans who must be educated into an appreciation of the state's maternal care for their shelter. The unpluger is much more dangerous: he gives testimony to the castrating effects of the city's maternal embrace. Unlike the pagan, this kind of heretic challenges the axiom of civic religion which underlies all current ideologies which on the surface are in opposition. According to this axiom, the citizen as *homo castrensis* needs the commodity called 'shelter'; his right to shelter is written into the law.⁵

The historian of space perception is still another kind of "unpluger." If he doesn't question his age's certainties, he will impute them to the dead, let their imperceptible voice be covered by the rumors of modern banality. He will colonize the past with the axioms of modernity. And yet, before he hangs these certainties in the wardrobe like empty clothes, he must examine their own hidden historic constitution.⁶

Homo castrensis claims a right to be billeted without giving shape to one's place through bodily acts of possession. Similarly, I will call him, who claims his right to daily kilometers in the traffic, *homo transportandus*. The "specificity" of modern space can be matched against both these anthropological models: *homo castrensis*, the billeted man and *homo transportandus*, the commuter.

The historian cannot satisfy himself with an assumption of continuity of experience and

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ Ivan Illich, "Dwelling", in Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 1992.

⁶ Otto Gerhard Oexle, "Sozialgeschichte - Begriffsgeschichte - Wissenschaftsgeschichte. Anmerkungen zum Werk Otto Brunners," in

perception between walking, yesterday, and the rhythm of the motor, today, between founding a house and getting a flat.

An unbridgeable gap severs the foot-bound landscape of yesterday from the motor-possessed present. We can no longer understand the articulation of a region in homogenous and heterogeneous spaces perceived by him who could only travel it by foot or on horseback.

Reciprocally, our speed-pregnant perception of space and time would be an enigma for him.

“La coupure,” the cut of which E. Garrin and E. Panofski spoke of in the history of thought, must be transposed to the history of perceptions.

The space that the modern commuter perceives daily is the space in which he is billeted to a flat and in which he commutes to work. It is differently structured than the go-able and inhabit-able places of the past. It reflects dependences that have become “natural” to us and that we do no longer question. The distance between home and work, between a sphere of consumption and a sphere of production belong to our “obvious” world. All these daily certainties are inscribed in a spatial organization. The “where?” of our activities determines and confirms unquestioned anthropological assumptions about who we are. Education to these assumptions takes the form of an education to the correct behavior “in space”: education to survival in traffic, or to life “in the seventh floor.”⁷ Our experiences and perceptions are so different from that of our forebears that we have the greatest difficulties putting ourselves in their place. Our vision is much less than theirs dependent on hand, foot and nose. Our life world is no longer limited by the concrete horizon of a village or of a valley.

The speed of traffic or the artificial climate of the flat are expressions of progress and

Vierteljahrshefte für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 71 (1984), pp. 305 - 341.

⁷ Ivan Illich, “Erziehung im siebten Stock,” in Ivan Illich, *Vom Recht auf Gemeinheit*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982, pp. 53 - 63.

development. But they are also technical mirrors of anthropological assumptions about our “innate” lacks. Speed determines a spatial order for people in need of transport. We falsify the past when we ascribe our needs to the dead. The speed of mechanical transportation has made us used to space-time relationships that were simply unthinkable before the transportation revolution of the 19th century. The comfort of our climatized housings bring about a kind of homeostasy of the senses, that makes us flee temperature differences that previously were an expression of the hardship of life. We no longer expect the coming winter with a mixture of resignation and good humor. It no longer conveys warm records of gatherings around the fireplace in cold nights. It is no longer a time of counting.

The motorized consumer, whose mobility warrants accessibility to attractive destinations as an unquestionable “right” can hardly imagine a world that was accessible but not “communicated,” inhabitable but not planned. During his holidays, he might meet people that do not have his “rights” and for that reason “must” build their own huts.

If we try to look into the past through the glass of our certainties, history appears to us as a catalogue of lacks. We have great difficulties to conceive that “there,” or “then,” spatial relations were quite different from what we know. We believe to “see” that people, then, had no right to a warm apartment, nor to jobs and resorts connected to a general system of communication.

Intransitive and active going—I cannot “be gone”—and passive “being transported” define very different spatial relations. Urban planners cannot quite ignore that difference: on occasion, they are still pedestrians, and when they cross a highway, they are exposed to the same dangers as everybody. They only do not give it any theoretical preeminence, and they forget it when they sit behind their drawing table. Then for them, quite as for Cerdà in 1860, the foot and the motorized wheel belong to the same category and are instruments for the satisfaction of the same need: being

transported, be it by institutional means or by “self-help.”

The pedestrian still evaluates distances in the calf of his legs. He instinctively translates Anaxagoras’ maxim, “man is the measure of all things” into “my step is the measure of all distances.” Traffic experts and planners measure the city with the motor and the wheel.

Pedestrians meet each other with the naked face. In spaces accessible to the feet, the outsider is visible: he can be received as a guest or ignored as a stranger. In streets where people hardly meet, because they hide in private tanks, the image of the stranger becomes easily a phantasm or a taboo.

On highways and parking lots, men and women compete for the same scarce space. Traffic planners are kinds of plumbers who try to make traffic jams less viscous. They do not document the public over the influence of motorized transportation on the habits, the perceptions and the image of man which raise in the shadow of their practice.

Illich calls “counterfoil research” a research on “who loses and who wins,” of the changes of personal empowerment, of habits and perceptions induced by technology. This research can, in my opinion only be led by citizens whose vision is not impaired by professional glasses. It is to this research that I want to invite you.

I will start with a challenge: an attempt to apprehend relations to space and space perceptions which are not permeated with the images of *homo castrensis* and *homo transportandus*. For that, I invite you to let your certainties in the wardrobe and undertake a trip into history.