

# Globalisation and Identity in Place and Space

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The idea of globalisation and it informing our identity is not new. Diogenes, a Greek philosopher from 412 B.C. declared he was a “citizen of the world” in response to a question about his place of origin. Fast forward to the year 1993 and it was a very cool way to refer to oneself if residing in Europe. The borders had just been opened through the European Union and there was strong sentiment regarding global citizenship and its connection to our identity. Since then we have entered an era of massive technological change. There now exists a keen interest in our ability to understand what mechanisms determine identity and how they interconnect in a globalised world. This paper aims to investigate identity through a prism of place; our physical environment, and space; our virtual environment. It will examine the circumstances of our physical environment through the lens of Emile Durkheim’s theory of ‘collective conscience’ and Arjun Appadurai theory of ‘deterritorialisation’. Following onto regard the space we occupy from a screen by utilising Karl Marx ‘technological determinism’ as a starting point and then transition to Bruno Latour’s ‘actor network theory’ and finally Berry Wellman’s ‘networked individualism’. There will be a discussion exploring nationalism and how that has influenced the notion of globalised identity. This paper will not be discussing the traditional markers of identity, class and gender, although it should be noted that they are important distinctions in this changing globalised technological world. The focus of this paper is place and space, the environment we live in, and the relationships we have that determine our identity in the globalised world.

Europe in the 1990s was the place to be. The optimism was palpable, and my prideful identity suited the feeling of freedom one has from being able to hop borders. This was the result of the ‘Schengen Agreement’ a treaty signed in 1985. The brainchild of France and Germany who wanted to move towards the abolishment of internal border checks in Europe (Schengen visa info). The western world was perceived as a kind of utopia, where there was a robust sense of liberty and safety. It was a wonderful point in time. This shared collection of beliefs and feeling can be referred to as the ‘collective conscience’. A term Emile Durkheim coined in 1893 in *The Division of Labour in Society* (Durkheim & Thompson, 2005). This group to which many people belonged created a mechanical solidarity through shared likeness and participation in beliefs that could be considered tribal, almost like a remnant from primitive times gone by. In this instance the collective conscience was a positive force in society and this mood of prosperity fostered peaceful attitudes of acceptance across cultures.

The ability for individuals to move across borders freely has been shown in data to impact on their identity by reducing the importance of nationalism. The British Attitudes Survey has shown a consistent decline in people identifying as British, from fifty-two percent in 1996 to forty-four percent in 2005 (March, Bradley, Love & Alexander, 2007). Data such as this could be an important marker for indicating that our sense of identity is not strongly connected to a geographical location. Upon reflection I feel most nationalistic when I am not living in my home country. When I am living overseas I constantly find myself telling people I am Australian, and I consider this to be identifying. This is my ‘imagined community’, a term coined by Benedict Anderson in 1983 that pertains to the place you were born and may live (Anderson, 2006). People hold in their mind a mental image of their affinity for a nation. For me, it creates the association between citizen and the nation state. I am Australian therefore I am from the lucky country and the land of the long weekend. It pertains to my identity insofar as I have an awareness of belonging.

During the time I called myself a world citizen I did not feel dislocated from my community. My impression of belonging was tied to the place I lived at that point in time rather than where I was born. My nationality important to my identity but not essential to my belonging in this globalised world. I am detached from the need to exist in a specific physical location. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has used the term ‘deterritorialisation’ to describe this (Appadurai, 1990). He states objects, ideas and exchanges we use to define culture and identity have been separated from physical places. Culture in this sense becomes fluid as it moves across boundaries and we are not anchored to a physical location.

The optimism of the 1990s ended abruptly with a host of prophecies about impending doom. They began with Nostradamus prediction for August 1999 that the world would end with ‘Armageddon’ then moved onto the ‘Y2K’ catastrophic computer failure set to occur at Millenia. There was a ubiquitous sense of fear that seemed to inform Durkheim’s collective conscience. Sadly; disaster did strike on September 9, 2001, when three thousand people lost their lives in a major terrorist attack on US soil. There was a sense of disbelief that this could occur in post-modern times and people became frightened and untrusting towards other cultures and races. I can’t recall having heard the phrase ‘citizens of the world’ much since then; and certainly not with the affection for which we used it.

This recalls to thought the reaction of the collective conscience and another of Durkheim’s theories,

‘anomie’(Durkheim & Bradbury, 1947). This is a condition in which society provides little moral guidance to people and then we see a mismatch between individuals or groups and the morals and standards society enforces. Post 9/11 saw a decline in the moral behaviour of individuals and groups. Attitudes of panic and dread led to some very powerful people making laws that subverted the moral code of universal human rights. The US government established a military prison in Guantanamo Bay to torture and detain people indefinitely on suspicion of having been participant in the terrorist attack. The American perspective disregarding globalised organisations such as the United Nations who aim to maintain world peace and security. Most citizens are in support of this facility and Donald Trump signed an executive order in January 2018 for this facility to remain open. The condition of ‘anomie’ leads to a fragmentation of social identity.

Durkheim’s collective conscience still operates as a function of fear for an event that occurred almost twenty years ago. This shared collection of beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes are seen as unifying in the American landscape. These exclusive beliefs abandon a globalised point of view. When I think of this it makes me very sad. Terror and war deprive both adults and children of much. But it is the children of these Americans who suffer the most. The children born into safe homes who are raised with ignorance and anxiety by a collective conscience. For they are robbed of their thoughts. They do not believe in the possibility of global citizenship or in a society that values freedom and diversity. Their identities impacted by the local physical environment in which they are raised. This brings us to the possibility that exists in the virtual space we occupy and its ability to facilitate our lives and identity.

It is part of the human condition to worry. When people first began to write Socrates lamented what it would do to our memories, and then when computers went into every home twenty years ago teachers worried that children would no longer be able to spell. One of the earliest theories used to understand the impact of technology on our lives was technological determinism, a term coined by Thorstein Veblen an American sociologist. It’s origins residing with Karl Marx(Thompson, 2016). He purports that technology has the power to shape our social structure and cultural structure. As a concept it tries to explain and understand how technology impacts on action and thought. The theory peddled a pervasive notion in academic literature that technology was powerful and evil. It was often used to investigate binary problems as it could provide a binary solution. This did not illuminate our understanding of the relationship between globalised phenomena and the ability to shape identity with thoughts and actions. The theory was too simple for something so complex. Recent research by Pew Internet Project that incorporated data collection from eleven countries clearly shows across many markers that participating in social networks and virtual reality groups is not harmful to participants(“Internet and Technology”, 2019). Seventy-five percent of respondents reported they learnt new information

from their online experiences and sixty-eight percent said they were able to identify false or misleading information. So, the idea that technology could take away our ability to think critically is a myth. Although there are other modes in which our virtual lives can inform our identity.

Globalisation in a virtual world can be both inclusive and exclusive. For many people the ability to exist in an online community gives them a space for belonging and this is important to identity. From the lonely Grandma at home participating in online scrabble to the teenage boy who identifies his gaming friends as his real mates. And then there are the exclusive groups, like the billionaire’s club. We can look at these relationships through the lens of Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory(Latour, 2007). There exist human and non-human agents whom are equal. ANT proposes neither social or technical positions are privileged. It explores how networks of relationships emerge and how they are composed, constructed and maintained. There is no distinction between social and technology but rather an association of heterogenous elements. I believe ANT explains that in many ways the same relationships are replicated in space and place. Although in space there appears to be fewer barriers to entry. It is not like living in a little village where you have to participate in the activities of that place and have no autonomy. Also; the fact that you don’t physically have to be there can be very advantageous, especially for disabled people. So, globalisation in technology liberates and limits us depending on whether we have been included or excluded from a group. Both in place and space the environment can become unstable. We can see the emergent pattern of sameness between place and space with similar conditions existing in each. Both environments having the ability to influence our sense of identity.

Finally, we will take a look at Barry Wellman’s ‘networked individualism’ in relation to the nation state offering virtual citizenship and it no longer being tied to geography(Wellman et al., 2006). Wellman coined this term in the year 2000. It is a term that encapsulates this era of individual agency in so much as it completely negates bureaucracy, abandoning the model of hierarchical social arrangements. He states with the evolution of information and technology we will see highly individualised people existing within very specific networked groups to which they choose their belonging. Ostensibly he is saying that people will be able to construct and curate their identity more than ever before. Perhaps the most pertinent example of this would be Estonia and their virtual citizenship program. Estonia leads the world in digital government by allowing anyone anywhere in the world to have a government issued digital identity. This digital e-residency gives people the ability to register a business and run it from their country. They also have access to all public digital information services. As of November 2017, over 27,000 people have registered to be e-residents. Estonia aims to have ten million residents by 2025. There also exists Bitnation, a block-chain based technology which enables people to create and join virtual nations. Bitnation began in 2014 and has over 10,000

citizens. Both Estonia and Bitnation link their initiatives to identity and freedom of choice (Symons, 2018). This narrative also has a strong economic component. They both state that place does not have to be tied to a physical location, implying that nationalism can be borderless and geographically fluid.

When we think about place and space in the globalised world it can be clearly observed that they are constantly changing landscapes. We can see the revised mood from optimism to pessimism via the behaviours of the collective conscience. People are redefining what it is to be nationalistic and considering virtual citizenships, a new form of cosmopolitanism. Others are forming relationships that shape the fabric of their lives in this new space. These activities give people's lives meaning and contribute to the construction of their identity. Globalisation provides a framework within place and space for change to occur in identity, but it is not what shapes our identity. Greek philosopher Heraclitus said

“Day by day, what you choose, what you think and what you do is who you become”.

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