Pavel Doboš

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GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT IN THE THESIS "IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES IN THE CZECH SOCIETY"

Introduction: representation and imagination of places and regions

Nowadays many perceptions of the world and its regions are highly influenced by diverse indirect sources of information that helps people to cultivate their geographical imagination related to far places. Individuals usually don't have an opportunity to learn about most world region through their personal experience so they must rely on different sources of knowledge making. Among these sources media are widely influential for instance. Nonetheless these sources are able to introduce highly stereotypized and ideologically biased representations of places and regions. The reason of this could be traced to the fact that representation can never be considered as a comprehensive reflexion of certain phenomenon, event or place because values, attitudes and cultural patterns of the one who represents are always integral part of representation (Hall 1997b). In this case representation is understood as signification with the use of linguistic, and sometimes also non-linguistic, means in order to achieve an indirect mediation of various phenomena to other people. Hall (ibid: 15) asserts that representation is an important part of the process through which meaning is produced and especially transmitted between members of society. According to him this is impossible to be accomplished without the use of language, signs and images, although it cannot be forgotten that these things are influenced by discourses which circulate in a society.

The practice of representation is never innocent in its consequences though because various kinds of representations are mirrored in perceptions that people create for themselves about diverse phenomena, events, places of even other people. Nonetheless the crucial question is how and how intensively various representations are able to project themselves into real perceptions, opinions and sentiments that sediment in minds of real people. As newer approaches of cultural studies notice, a critical analysis of cultural products, including those with representations, should

never be separated from an analysis of how these cultural products are perceived and what effect they have on their consumers.

To make any insight into the complex of this effectiveness possible it is needed at first to understand how actually real perceptions of phenomena, events, places or other people look like in a particular society. Since the character of the thesis is supposed to be primarily geographical the aim is to critically analyse perceptions and imaginations of places and regions above all, to try to critically interpret how these perceptions and imaginations look like, including answering the question from what discourses they draw for their existence.

Geographical approach

The research is about an analysis of perceptions of selected world regions which can be found in the Czech society. Concerning the variety of geographical subdisciplines it is intended to keep the research in the field of cultural geography and particularly in the segment of cultural geography which deals with representations of places. Thus important theoretical recourses should be also found in Birmingham school of cultural studies, postcolonial studies and generally in those social scientific approaches that are somehow interested in representations of far places and regions. These referenced theoretical bases could be interconnected by a proposition that Duncan and Gregory (1999: 4-5) mention when they give an apt comparison saying that similarly as a translation of a text cannot underpin all symbolic connotations of the translated language a translation of one place to a cultural idiom of another place loses certain symbolic content that is important for inhabitants of the place and replaces it with another symbolic qualities which are added by translators and their culture.

The thesis is a part of an approach that began spreading after so called cultural turn under the name of New Cultural Geography. It was this approach that started to be engaged in the critique of representation practice of geographical phenomena. This critique aimed at the fact that represented regions and places imply values of representing group or individual. Coming from poststructuralist views on language and text new cultural geographers began to urge that represented places and landscapes can be read as texts illustrating opinions and beliefs of people (Crang 1996: 27). In this way of seeing place it can be said places acquire their meaning and identities as a result of culture and context where practice of representation is happening.

Analytical basis of the research can be traced to the interpretative anthropology whose notion is that an analysis of a cultural meaning must be carried out primarily as an analysis of a cultural text. Culture of a society functions as a collection of texts where cultural interpretations are inscribed and where members of the society draw for their interpretations of diverse social situations (Geertz 1973). Authors of cultural studies add that it is important to connect these interpretations with the problem of power. So it is also crucial to observe how cultural interpretations derive from dominant constellation of power and knowledge that appears in the society (Hall 1997b: 51).

The approach was chose for its emphasis on the role of culture in forming geographical phenomena, for its taking into account questions of discourse and power in their influence on society and for its critical stance toward the representation practice. These things are hardly to be found in older geographical approaches. On the other hand newer approaches emanating from non-representional theory elaborated mainly by Thrift (2008) often ignore the problematic of power in representations more than desirable. In this theory carriers of representations become just a superficial causation of emotional and affective reaction in most cases. This means such a research loses its potential to deeply recognize the connection of power and representation that is crucial for cultivating societal knowledge through media products that are usually the most wide-spread carriers of representations nowadays. In other words non-representional theory has no account of how representional contents and interpretations get embedded in the world (Couldry 2012: 31).

Nonetheless it is also important to mention that representations, even media representations, are performative rather than a cultural product detached from everyday bodily living. Representations aren't pre-given substances that subsequently influence peoples' perceptions and opinions, but are part of the shaping process all the time, performed and also performing when consumed and rearticulated. Perceptions and imaginations of far places and people aren't formed as a reaction on representations as ethereal ideas but rather arise through the course of representation, through its performance while making emotional relation to the represented subject (Chouliaraki 2013: 150). This means it remains crucial to work with the concept of performance in the research, which also means it must be further reconsidered how and whether at all to use non-representional theoretical approach in the thesis and how it is possible to approximate to the conception of more-than-

representional (Lorimer 2005), since it remains undesirable to leave representional way of cultural geography as the main theoretical base of the research.

The importance of media representation in forming of perceptions of places and regions

In the culturally geographical approach of the thesis place and region are no more understood as still and rigid geographical phenomena and are much more characterised as active compositions of traces that are left by various cultural groups, whether traces are of material or of non-material form. The latter is connected with ideas, opinions and imaginations, thus with all important aspects which appear through representations. Such traces are never neutral though because behind them there are certain cultural ideals of how the world should look like, which shows the presence of an endeavour of persuading people to agree with these ideals (Anderson 2010: 5). Hence region and place are not only reproduced by cultural groups that inhabit them, but can also be reproduced by other cultural groups. It is then impossible to reach a *true* image of a place or region since what image gets to the forefront depends on power struggle between cultural groups reproducing different images of places and regions. Crang (1996: 40) says reading a place is never about discovering a cultural essence of a place but about revealing how visions of places means different things for different groups and how meaning of these visions are being reproduced and altered.

In this age it is possible to consider media to be a powerful actor in the struggle about visions of places and regions because media are the most wide-spread carrier of representations of far regions and places as was mentioned earlier. Thus cultural groups that have influence on forming media representations can be regarded as groups in possession of very good means of spreading their worldviews or opinions and in doing so being able to reproduce associated cultural meanings in the society. By the society it is meant the group of people that are prevalent consumers of similar patterns of media representations, typically a national society drawing on patterns from national media. Adams (2009: 161) notices that meanings in media representation are internalized by individuals because of a long-term consummation of media products that contain same or similar patterns of meanings. Due to the long-term exposure of a specific discourse of media representation people obtain a certain framework for understanding the world. The power of the framework lies in the fact that it is shared by most members of the society.

Although it can be said that culture of the society that consume representations can and probably does correspond with culture of the group that create representations there is always space for disharmony and it is for several reasons. Firstly consumers of representations can have access to alternative sources of information about various places and regions. Secondly the correspondence of cultural meanings of creator and consumer of media representation doesn't have to be high because creator and consumer can originate from different social groups. Thirdly the creation of media representation is usually influenced not only by culture but also by fields of economics or politics for instance and this very fact can change meanings of created representations into higher disharmony with cultural meanings of consumer. Fourthly from diverse reasons consumers of media representations can disbelieve or actively oppose creators of media representations since there is no power without resistance as famous Foucault's (1980: 142) thought claims. That is why Hall (2005 [1980]) recognizes processes of coding and decoding. The final resemblance of these processes depends on the degree of asymmetry between cultural codes of the source of a representation and codes of the receiver of a representation. Richardson (2007: 41) adds that this is in addition influenced by conscious preferences which a consumer of media representation has for a creator of representation.

Hence media representation of far places or regions and real perceptions and imaginations of same far places or regions can differ a lot even at those people who gets knowledge about them exclusively from media. The research of the thesis wants to explore this difference, because it is believed that media are in fact the main phenomenon that enables us to think of cultural globalization. Morley (2000: 14-15) asserts that for most people, even in the West, the globalization actually means consumption of images of distant places through media from safe place of their home and locality. That is why it is regarded as important to investigate the problematic of media representation of far places and regions with its relation to the problematic of actual perceptions and imaginations of same places and regions that can be found in the society – particularly at those members of the society whose relationship with media representation is nothing less and nothing more than the fact they are its receivers or consumers.

Imaginative geographies as the analytical concept

As a basic conceptual fundament of the thesis there are used imaginative geographies that at first appeared in the work of Edward Said (2008 [1978]). In this sense imaginative geographies are meant as highly ideological ideas and visions of places which define and emphasize mainly otherness of these places. As one of the proper ways how to critically approach representations of various places it is to relate these places to the analysis of discourse of otherness (Duncan 1993: 39). Said's imaginative geographies are very useful in this respect because they can be considered as a part of discursive formation which defines general system of narrating about far regions or places of the world. Discursive formation is a general system of narrative whereas discourse can be considered as a group of narratives that belong to the same discursive formation (Foucault 2002 [1969]: 179-180). Thus imaginative geographies are general system of narrating about otherness in geographical phenomena while discourses under this discursive formation can differ according to the place or region that is their target.

Imaginative geographies can produce very diverse visions of places and this depends on factors of who is their creator, what is his relation to the real place which imaginative geography reference to, and importantly also what is the real place actually. Nonetheless as a part of discursive formation diverse kinds of imaginative geographies are connected by the way how they construct knowledge about otherness. Imaginative geographies of even the same places can acquire diversified shapes in minds of individuals that depend on individuals' cultural experiences. But constructions of imaginative geographies are linked by the way how they achieve "regimes of truth". Imaginative geographies embrace a principle of ignoring various particular phenomena, things or people in places and especially they embrace an effort of simplifying the complex, of limiting the complexity of various places in order to get an easily graspable imagination that is able to point at varied degrees of otherness. As the conceptual fundament imaginative geographies got a very important role in cultural geography because working with them allows a geographer to critically examine and perhaps deconstruct geographical discourses of otherness (Driver 2005).

Said (2008 [1978]) tells us imaginative geographies are about construction of perceptions of various places while these perceptions have their own meanings that don't actually reflect a real shape of a place very much but much more reflect attitudes and relations to the place from the position of meaning producers. Meanings that are given to places are here to dramatize remoteness and otherness

between what is near and what is far. Hence a practice of identifying some space as "ours" and some space as "theirs" can be a geographical distinction of highly arbitrary character. In other words imaginative geographies can be regarded as constructions that translate distance into difference through series of spatializations (Gregory 2004: 17).

Gregory (2000: 313) asserts that through his notion of "poetics of space" Said thinks of imaginations of places and space as crucial factors for formation of identity. Due to a practice of creating our known space in contrast to their unfamiliar space the feeling of identity can come into being. In this way collective identity is adherent to the known and detached from the unfamiliar. Collective identity then tries to find common language. Thus imaginative geographies legitimize their own contradictory means and contents of utterances about imaginatively similar and close places and imaginatively far and different places. These two languages use different linguistic tropes and figures, which leads to a differentiated reception of otherness for different places (Said 2008 [1978]: 87). This differentiation usually emanate from the relation of cultural background of individuals or groups who reproduce an imaginative geography and cultural background of a real place that is an inspiration for the particular imaginative geography.

According to Said (ibid: 69) human mind creates specific geographical phenomena cognitively with interference of external influence and although they subsequently appear to exist objectively they still have imaginary character limited by cognition. Notions of "our" and "their" spaces exist in our minds above all. Afterwards it isn't needed for the boundary to be respected by "them", but for its coming into being it is enough when it is part of "our" mentality. This seems crucial in the present age of global information reach of the media. Morley and Robins (1995: 134) believe that this reach is primarily one-way though because the West appropriates the right to represent non-western others through the media and at the same time project its own doubts and fears into representations. By these means the West is able to grant itself definitions that distinguish it from non-western others, which is a wide-spread form of articulation of otherness nowadays. Gregory (1994: 204) asserts this right not only makes possible to imagine various far places and regions, but also encourages panoptic observation that strengthen a feel of permanent surveillance over fate of others without demanding a creation of any moral engagement.

In a similar way Robins (1996: 19-21) explains his distinction between experience of vision and experience of touch. This distinction is very important in the age of media being saturated by images about various far places and regions. He says

that by having to come to see the world by means of mediated vision people are also increasingly able to detach from contact with world reality, from contact with others who are seen through the media. This vision is always one-way and others or other places can become even more radically different like they weren't actually corporeal (ibid: 31). This is why it is important not to see imaginative geographies just literally imaginatively but to see them as performative and to remember that imaginative geographies can be constructed in a way of little reference to those who actually live their everyday lives on places of inspirations for imaginative geographies (Gregory 1999: 145, cf. Gregory 2004).

Said (2008 [1978]) used concept of imaginative geographies in the project of critique of Orientalism to show how Orient was represented and imaginatively produced by Europeans through textual and visual production introducing it as backward, mystical and irrational place. For imaginative geographies the practice of stereotypization is widely influential since it can make Orient to be a place that is transparent so everyone knows what to expect from it. In this way stereotypization usually works to keep symbolic boundary between what belongs and what doesn't belong into the category of otherness (Hall 1997a: 258). Said notices that imaginatively made superiority through stereotypization helped to legitimize European hegemony over Orient. Orient became Europe's opposite and its otherness enabled Europe to get imagination about its own civilization and right to civilize Oriental others. Approach to Orient might have been imaginative, but also had real consequences such as colonialism and imperialism.

Imaginative geographies of Orientalism are specific and cannot be applied on whole non-western world. Nonetheless the concept, which has been elaborated by Said, can be used for an analysis of any far place or region of the world notwithstanding imaginative geographies of diverse places and regions can be highly differentiated nowadays (Sharp 2009: 25). In my previous work (Doboš 2013) the aim was to search for differentiation of imaginative geographies inside media representations. In this sense my intention is to continue and analyze what particular and how differentiated imaginative geographies settle in minds of members of the Czech society through effects of media influence. An assumed scope of mine is going to be on African and Asian regions especially.

From the analytical point of view it is possible to mark three dimensions of imaginative geographies: textual and visual, geopolitical and performative. For every imaginative geography dimensions can function in a different way but are always interlinked. These three dimensions are regarded as a possible analogy to Soja's

(1999: 265-269) distinction of Conceived, Perceived and Lived Space as three dimensions of spatiality, but the relation of defined dimensions to Soja's trialectics of spatiality must be further elaborated. For the textual and visual dimension methods of theoretico-methodological project of Critical Discourse Analysis shall be used most probably (see, e.g., Fairclough 1995). For the geopolitical dimension interpretative technics of Critical Geopolitics seems proper (see, e.g., Ó Tuathail 1996). Nonetheless the performative dimension remains a question so far. Analysis of motivations to agency towards distant others in relation to viewed media performances (Chouliaraki 2013) seems to be a suitable form of analysis. But still at this dimension the problematic of affect may become enriching therefore further study of non-representational theory might or might not help to answer the question.

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