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BOOK REVIEW

Social Imaginaries of Space: Concepts and Cases.

B. Debarbieux. Cheltenham & Northampton, MA, 2019: Edward Elgar Publishing. 209 pp., ISBN 978-1-78897-386-1.

Every community needs to imagine itself as a community, and Debarbieux sets himself the task to uncover the spatial elements of the social imaginaries that underlie modern state formation. Imaginary, here, is a collective societal understanding of the world and the significations of practices within it. This book focuses on the instituting and constitutive spatialities of the social imaginaries that facilitate the forming of nation-state communities. For Debarbieux, space is 'instituting' when it connects a collective symbolic universe to its institutions, for example, the state or currency. It is 'constitutive' when it connects individuals and collectives to the spatial practices and spaces that identify them, such as capital cities. As such, spatial imaginaries are essential in forming societies and their practices. For example, John Muir's pantheist and sacred imaginary of wilderness became institutive and constitutive; it constituted a collective through the *Sierra Club*, instituted the value of wilderness opposed to urbanisation, and institutionalised its protection by law and its policing, and evoked Yosemite as natural symbol of the United States.

To assess the 'measure of the spatial dimension constitutive of social imaginaries' (p. 178), the book contains four concept chapters, six case chapters, and an epiphany (sic!). After chapter 2 introduced the general argument, described above, the remaining conceptual chapters investigate the spatialities of state imaginary, national imaginary, and post-national imaginary. In between, several case studies exemplify these concepts, while the concluding epiphany looks at changing border practices and invites a reflection upon spatial

state imaginaries in a globalising world. This separation of cases and concepts, however, sometimes obfuscates the conceptual chapters. While Debarbieux suggests picking your own reading order, a back and forth between concepts and cases is sometimes required to grasp the concepts. A lack of hierarchy in its sub-headings further obscures the chapters, making it unclear when argumentation expands or moves forward.

Chapter 4 employs Thomas More's *Utopia* and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* to argue that area, land, and places of interaction and transaction are fundamental forms of spatiality for modern state imaginaries of territory. Here, area corresponds to the territory where law applies, land to the material and human resources the territory contains, and the places of interaction and transactions are shaped by state-imposed institutions and conventions. Chapters 5 and 6 illustrate this argument by co-tracing state development and cartography in England and colonial Indochina. For Debarbieux, maps both define state territory and the resources it contains. Finally, he demonstrates how the functional and symbolic objects of a border shape spatial behaviour and thus constitute social practices.

In chapter 7, Debarbieux argues that language, religion, and nationalism construct national imaginaries by connecting individual and group experiences to their state territory. National languages homogenise interactions within the territory, state religion connects territory to values of faith, while nationality informs territory-based practices, such as political participation. Simultaneously, these processes differentiate the nation from other nation-states. Language, religion, and nationalism thus shape the phenomenological expression of the nation in connection to state territory, providing the basis for the nation-state. Chapter 8 traces such internally homogenising functions of capital cities, in particular Paris and Washington, where monuments, high

schools, and urban design are places where national imaginary is constructed or contested.

Chapter 8 wonders whether globalisation and transformations of borders affect post-national political imaginaries of space. Inter-governmental organisations invoke the globe as a societal scale, and Debarbieux particularly traces 'global capitalism' as envisioned by multinational corporations and institutions like the WTO, and 'global civil society' as promoted by the World Social Forum. Although their acting reference is global, for Debarbieux they do not yet constitute a global territory as their spheres of action and its institutions remain predominantly regional or national, while they invoke post-territorial spatialities as networks and diaspora. Nonetheless, such competing social imaginaries of space removed the sole hegemonic status of nation-state imaginaries. In the final case chapters, this is illustrated through imaginaries of 'Italianness' in New York's Little Italy and global imaginaries of nature inspired by NASA pictures of earth from extraterrestrial space.

In the last 7 pages, Debarbieux takes Hobbes's Leviathan to a contemporary European border to arrive at the epiphany that the modern spatial imaginary of state, based on territory, is changing. Nonetheless, the state is not losing significance and neither does the border. Its meaning might be rapidly transforming as it becomes more porous and cross-border cooperation is institutionalised, the border remains eminently present in the application of law and citizenship, the exploitation of cross-border opportunities, as a form of heritage indicating our progress in national cooperation, or for those who campaign for the reinstating of impermeable borders. The transformation of borders is, for Debarbieux, nonetheless a sign of changing social imaginaries of space which signifies a

move beyond the territorially based conceptions of the nation-state.

Overall, this book provides a fascinating overview of practices through which the modern nation-state aligned itself to its territory, and is an invitation to consider how the spatial forms of contemporary state imaginaries are transforming. By turning to the concept of social imaginaries Debarbieux moves beyond notions of the nation-state as ideology, which he feels overestimate the potentialities of one-sided imposition. Rather, he argues, imaginaries are always formed in the interplay of the state, its objects, and its inhabitants. As the imaginary of the state can be contested and its symbols subverted – think of Tiananmen Square in China becoming a symbol of defiance – it is ultimately formed in the public sphere. As such, this contribution provides a conceptual frame to study territorial governance, spatial identities, and sense of place through the interactions of place, practices, and meanings. However, given the book's overall emphasis on the state, discussions on the role of power – whether state power or issues of class, race, and gender – are surprisingly absent. While he regularly mentions the instituting and constitutive role of law, the exercise of power is never more than implicitly explored. Although French scholars, such as Foucault, extensively explored constructions and operations of power, Debarbieux predominantly employs French literature on imaginaries. Despite this absence, his introduction of Francophone work on such imaginaries into English literature is a valuable one, and the challenge of power could be tackled in future work, either by Debarbieux or other scholars of space.

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