

Changing Places

New A Level Subject Content Overview

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Introduction

Geographers share an interest in places and the ways in which they are changing: our high streets with their changing mixes of businesses and public spaces, for example, and residential neighbourhoods, churned by waves of migration. To understand urban and rural places such as these and the processes they illuminate, it will be helpful to develop a more general understanding of place. So, as Stephen Daniels has observed, 'it is not just that specific places are being studied, but the very idea of place' (Daniels 1992, p.310). The following identifies some of the key theoretical concepts and perspectives that geographers use to identify, research and better understand the geographical nature of places.

In the Changing Places section of A Level Geography, the concept of place significantly progresses upon GCSE understandings of this term, while it anticipates those in higher education, benefiting those who will go on to study geography at university. At GCSE level, place is understood as locality, a geographical scale somewhere between the home and the region. At A Level, a more complex picture of place emerges. There are two aspects to this. First, place is understood as a geographical nexus of connections and linkages including flows of people, ideas, information, wealth and things, which come together in and define a geographical location or locality. Since these flows reach from the local to the global, place is not simply a synonym for locality, or the opposite of the global. A Level students will study place through at least two localities – one where they live, and one or more contrasting locations. Through these localities, they will have understood how place exists in and through its wider linkages and relationships, which assume economic, political and other forms.

A second dimension in understandings of place, more closely associated with cultural geography, refers to meaning. Place has been defined as **location + meaning**. In this equation, **location** refers to a position within abstract space, such as a grid reference. **Meaning**, as the term is used here, has two components, and it is essential to recognise both. First, places can be meaningful to individuals, in ways that are **personal** or subjective. These meanings may be expressed in terms of the perceptions of place, for example, or of particular associations or attributes of place such as danger or beauty. Second, places can be meaningful at a **social** or cultural level, such that meanings are shared, for example when some but not all members of a community or society share an understanding of a place as beautiful or significant in some way. Through meaning, rather than scale, it is possible to be precise about place, distinguishing this from related terms and concepts such as area, landscape and region, which are closely related but not synonymous. Places are dynamic, changing both in terms of their material human and physical geographies, and also the meanings that are associated with them. Therefore, all places are **changing places**, in constant states of what geographers have variously referred to as 'becoming' and being

transformed (at different rates). This means that, to develop an understanding of changing places, it is necessary to be attentive to both components of place – their material geographies (i.e. their geographical features and characteristics) and geographical meanings – and to see that, though they do so at different speeds, places change constantly.

Some themes introduced in the A Level are developed in greater detail and complexity in higher education. The A Level introduces an understanding of how different groups of people can see places differently, and have different scope to shape those places. This introduces a more political understanding of place, which focusses upon contestations of and through place, which may be pursued at university. At that level, there is also more scope to explore metaphors of place, including the wider understandings of how place-based language and ideas work in society, including to position individuals and groups as insiders and outsiders, and to constrain their behaviour and prospects.

Concepts, Concerns, Content

Key geographical concepts and concerns and an introduction to the theoretical underpinning of them

Peter Jackson (2006, 199) has drawn a distinction between the vocabulary – ‘a virtually endless list of place-names’ – and the grammar of geography, the concepts and theories that connect and make sense of those geographical facts. Jackson’s grammar of geography begins with ‘space and place’, continuing with other key concepts including scale and connection, proximity and distance, and relational thinking. Geography, understood in this way, means more than memorising facts and more than armchair theory, and it envisions geographical imagination as a **dialogue between observations and ideas**, beginning with place.

Social, economic and demographic characteristics, relationships and connections of places

The two human geography themes within the new A Level core curriculum – Changing Places and Global Systems – should be seen, not as scalar opposites, but as interconnected spheres and processes, shaping and being shaped by each other. Doreen Massey argues that **places are shaped by internal and external linkages**, which bind the local together with the global. This is explained as follows in the ALCAB report, on which the new A Level is based:

Relationships and connections between people, the economy, and the environment help to explain why places are dynamic and constantly changing. Relationships and connections operate through a combination of local forces and links between communities, such as employment opportunities and migration, and external forces operating at different scales from regional to global, such as government policies, the decisions of multinational corporations or the impacts of regional or global economic restructuring. Those forces for change are reflected in the demographic, socio-economic and cultural characteristics of residents and in the fabric and nature of places. (ALCAB, July 2014)

Massey’s concept of a global sense of place illuminates the ways in which places are being made and remade in the age of globalisation and accelerated mobility of people and things. Some observers worry that globalisation is eroding places, reducing once-distinctive places to uniform suburbs and ‘clone towns’ dominated by chain stores (Creswell, 2008). Massey argues, instead, that connections can lead to an endless series of specificities, each contributing to the ‘accumulated history of a place’. From this perspective, places are being reshaped, rather than simply eroded, through local and distant connections. This understanding of place as a nexus of connections and linkages has counterparts in economic geography, where (as the *Dictionary of Human Geography* puts it) ‘[place] stands for the necessity of economic **processes** to be grounded in specific locales and for those locales to be proactive competitors within the global economy’ (Henderson, 2009, p. 539).

This emphasis on connections and linkages signals the intrinsically dynamic – moving, changing – character of place, suggesting that places are **always changing**, even if this is faster and more

obvious in some cases than others. Massey suggests that, though change can be unsettling, resistance to change and '**attempts to stabilise** the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time' (Massey, 1994, 5) are ultimately unrealistic, attempts to swim against the tide. Better to accept that places change and embrace the double meaning of 'changing places' in order to have some agency in this: changing places are always already changing, and they are being changed, by people.

Meanings and representations attached to places

When a place cannot be defined simply in terms of scale, as the opposite of the global, but also of the kinds of linkages and relationships identified by Massey, attention shifts not simply to the flows of people and things and the geographies they shape, but also to the ways in which these processes and the geographies they shape are understood: their **meanings**. Peter Jackson explores meaning in his seminal cultural geography text, *Maps of Meaning* (1989), which took its title from cultural critic Stuart Hall's definition of culture, and explored the ways in which individuals and groups find and make meaning in places, landscapes and other geographies. Developing this idea, Tim Creswell (2008) explains place as 'a meaningful segment of geographical space'. Thus, for example, 'Latitude 51° 30' 18" N, Longitude 0° 1' 9" W is a location but London Docklands is a place. 'While location refers to position within a framework of abstract space, often indicated by 'objective' markers such as degrees of longitude and latitude, or distance from another location, place has come to refer to a mixture of 'objective' and 'subjective' facets including location but adding other, more subtle, attributes of the world we inhabit' (Creswell, 2014, 249). Creswell adds that these segments of space can vary in scale, ranging for example from a café or a castle (favourite and famous places) to neighbourhoods and entire cities. The ALCAB report explains:

Meaning and representation relates to how humans perceive, engage with and form attachments to the world. This might be the everyday meanings that humans attach to places bound up with a sense of identity and belonging. It also extends to ways that meanings of place might be created, such as through place making and marketing.
(ALCAB, July 2014)

There are two components to meaning, and it is important to recognise both. First, meaning has a personal or subjective dimension. Place is related to other geographical concepts including region and area, which also refer to bounded and changing segments of geographical space (Henderson, 2009). What makes place a distinctive concept, distinguishing it from some other geographical concepts, and particularly space, is meaning, which people attach to it. Humanistic geographers, Yi Fu Tuan and Ted Relph, 'identified place as a subjectively sensed and experienced phenomenon' (Henderson, 2009, p. 539). Tuan explained how people make places by differentiating segments of space, forming attachments to them, and attaching meanings to them. 'We live in space. There is no space for another building on the lot. The Great Plains look spacious. Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. ... Geographers study places. Planners would like to evoke "a sense of place".' (Tuan 1977, 3) This understanding of meaning and of places defined by meaning has since been challenged and developed by Peter Jackson, Doreen Massey and others, who have shown how meanings are grounded in concrete geographies and how meanings are specific to particular groups and identities. Jackson, drawing on Stuart Hall, explains that 'cultures are *maps of meaning* through which the world is made intelligible'; and 'cultures are not simply systems of meaning and value carried around in the head' but are 'made concrete through patterns of social organization' (Jackson, 1989, 2). This means that, though meaning can be understood partly in personal or subjective terms, and framed as perceptions of space, meaning also has a social dimension, and meanings are both shared and contested within and between different communities and societies; places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts. Some but not all members of a community or society share an understanding of a place as beautiful or significant in some way. For example, while the English countryside may be a place of relaxation and beauty to many members of the majority society, it may be a place of work and anxiety for some minorities. Equally, different groups attach different values and meanings to London's Docklands, taking different positions on its past (its 'heritage') and holding different views on its present development and its future.

Exemplification of core content

To 'explore both the continuity and the changing nature of place and places through empirical data and as perceived by groups and individuals', students must examine two sub-themes, which correspond to the two principal components of place, explained above in terms of localities in which human connections and economic processes are grounded, and the maps of meaning, which distinguish places from spaces. These two themes are formally defined as: '(i) the socio-economic and demographic characteristics, relationships and connections of places; and (ii) the cultural meanings and representations attached to places' (all quotations in this paragraph are from the ALCAB report, July 2014). In practice, these two themes are closely connected. For example, both sub-themes attend to internal and external connections including flows of people, ideas and things, though this is more central to the first of the two themes.

Within this section of the syllabus, students will study at least two places: the place where they live, and one or more contrasting locations. This approach lends itself to both quantitative and qualitative methods of study, and also to fieldwork and individual study. In contrast with the other human geography core theme – Global Systems – this theme should be accessible to classes and individual students, seeking to conduct fieldwork. Their local environments provide much scope for fieldwork, which can begin with a range of local studies and explorations (Phillips, 2012).

(i) At A Level, the 'socio-economic and demographic characteristics, relationships and connections of places' are examined through some combination of: 'demography, and cultural difference and diversity; economic and social inequalities; food production, circulation, and consumption' (ALCAB report, July 2014). The first and second of these themes are illustrated through the work of Doreen Massey (1994). Massey's geographical descriptions and reflections – including a vivid critical portrait of a street near her home: Kilburn High Road in London – reveal places that are shaped by cultural, political and economic connections. Through her picture of Kilburn, a place in north London which includes significant communities of Irish and Asian heritage, Massey distilled a more general idea, which has particular relevance to the modern world: a 'global sense of place'.

Take, for instance, a walk down Kilburn High Road, my local shopping centre. It is a pretty ordinary place, north-west of the centre of London. Under the railway bridge the newspaper stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State. The post boxes down the High Road, and many an empty space on a wall, are adorned with the letters IRA. Other available spaces are plastered this week with posters for a special meeting in remembrance: Ten Years after the Hunger Strike. At the local theatre Eamon Morrissey has a one-man show; the National Club has the Wolfe Tones on, and at the Black Lion there's Finnegans Wake. In two shops I notice this week's lottery ticket winners: in one the name is Teresa Gleeson, in the other, Chouman Hassan. Thread your way through the often almost stationary traffic diagonally across the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the window, four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams of cloth. On the door a notice announces a forthcoming concert at Wembley Arena: Anand Miland presents Rekha, life, with Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Jahi Chawla and Raveena Tandon. On another ad, for the end of the month, is written, 'All Hindus are cordially invited'. In another newsagents I chat with the man who keeps it, a Muslim unutterably depressed by events in the Gulf, silently chafing at having to sell the Sun. Overhead there is always at least one aeroplane - we seem to have on a flight-path to Heathrow and by the time they're over Kilburn you can see them clearly enough to tell the airline and wonder as you struggle with your shopping where they're coming from. Below, the reason the traffic is snarled up (another odd effect of time-space compression!) is in part because this is one of the main entrances to and escape routes from London, the road to Staples Corner and the beginning of the M1 to 'the North'.

Massey's picture of Kilburn suggests how teachers and students might conduct their own fieldwork: investigating places by walking down local streets where they may observe and record the different connections, and how these are represented and meanings made from them, in their respective local areas (Phillips, 2012; Phillips and Johns, 2012).

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The third topic identified by ALCAB, through which A Level students may study the relationships and connections that shape places, is concerned with food production, circulation and consumption. Again, this is highly amenable to fieldwork and individual study. The relationships between food and place are signalled in the subtitle of a study by David Bell and Gill Valentine (1997): 'We Are Where We Eat'. Bell and Valentine showed how places are experienced through locally identified produce, eating practices and/or restaurants. Methods for researching the connections and relationships, which shape these food geographies, are exemplified in an accessible research paper (aimed not only at academics, but wider audiences too) which describes a 'supply chain stretching from UK supermarket shelves to a Jamaican farm, and concluding in a North London flat' (Cook 2004, 642).

Though Doreen Massey's and Ian Cook's methods, in these studies, were qualitative, this section of Changing Places also lends itself to the use of quantitative data and more systematic survey methods (ALCAB, July 2014). Researchers have investigated, for example, how Christmas celebrations vary by time and place (Danny Miller's *Unwrapping Christmas* illustrates this work). There is scope for A Level students to pursue similar research, drawing upon their own experiences and also upon online quantitative data sources such as the FSA's biannual Food & You consumer surveys and the annual National Diet and Nutrition Surveys. In contrast to this mixed methods approach, the section (of Changing Places) on cultural meanings and representations may be more suited to the use of qualitative methods though, once again, both quantitative and qualitative methods are possible.

(ii) At A Level the 'cultural meanings and representations attached to places' are examined through some combination of the following, as specified in the ALCAB report (July 2014): 'place making and marketing, drawing on examples such as regional development agencies, tourist marketing, and property marketing materials; representation of place through photography and film, music and art, literature and poetry, through cartography, census data, statistical representations, digital worlds and geo-spatial technologies such as geographical information systems; lived experience of place in the past and present. Developing understanding of how residents understand and see the places in which they live. These understandings may sometimes contrast with governmental and corporate representations such as those in place marketing or planning documents.' These representations matter in a number of ways, shaping the actions and behaviours of individuals, groups of people, businesses, institutions and governments. For example, they may influence decisions about where to invest in travel or property, or they may be important for people's sense of identity, including attachments to place and identities that may be less directly geographical, but formed in particular places.

While some of the examples of geographical meaning and representations, mentioned above, are straightforward, others may be less familiar to geography teachers and students. For example, while documents such as tourist marketing materials and guide books may be commonplace in the geography classroom, the use of imaginative literature such as landscape poetry and travel books may require more introduction (see Sheers 2008). In practice, relatively accessible travel books such as Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory* (about a journey through the Mississippi area) and imaginative works on nature and place such as Robert McFarlane's *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (about relic pathways through the British Isles) may provide good points of departure.

Indicative Case Studies and Reading List

As explained above, A Level students will study place through at least two localities – where they live, and contrasting location(s) – and they will explore selected themes through these localities. Some examples of case studies, through which they may do this, include investigations of 'clone towns', regeneration, how or why some places are rapidly changing compared to others, the changing demographics or social make up of a place, and connections within and between places. These examples have formed part of the fieldwork tradition and may be replicated by students in their own field studies.



Reading List

A Level Curriculum Advisory Board, 2014, Report of Panel on Geography:

<https://alevelcontent.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/alcab-report-of-panel-on-geography-july-2014.pdf>

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