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Towards a spatialised understanding of reconciliation

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Abstract

This paper argues that we should conceive of reconciliation spatially in order to unlock new insights into the process of reconciling divided societies. It seeks to respond to recent calls to put peace at the heart of geographical research, and suggests that one way in which the challenge of developing peace geographies can be meaningfully progressed is by exploring the spatial elements of the notion of reconciliation. The paper identifies four areas where a spatialised approach to reconciliation is beginning to emerge across the disciplines of urban planning, legal geographies, political science and international development. These include the role of the built environment as a facilitator of reconciliation, the existence of spatial barriers to reconciliation, the role of formalised spaces of reconciliation and the impact of everyday spaces of reconciliation. The paper interrogates the way that space creates possibilities for processes of reconciliation, and the ways that distinctive types of space are in turn created by these processes. Finally, it suggests fruitful avenues for future research, including by working across disciplines.

Key words:

Reconciliation, geographies of peace, space, peacebuilding

Introduction

The notion of reconciliation is a vital challenge in efforts to remake peace in the wake of serious violence. The question of how reconciliation can be promoted following violent conflict has been the subject of intense debate by peace and conflict theorists for many years. While some see it as a 'pervasive and fundamental concept in human societies' (Santa-Barbara 2007, 174), others question whether the very idea of expecting victims and perpetrators to reconcile is, at best, overly optimistic and, at worst, insulting (see Chayes and Minow 2003; Crocker 2002).

This paper contributes to the body of work exploring how reconciliation can be achieved in divided societies by suggesting one way of gaining new insight into the diverse processes of reconciliation. It argues for a focus on the spatial aspects of reconciliation; the way space creates possibilities for processes of reconciliation and the ways that distinctive types of space are in turn created or transformed by these processes. A number of scholars touch on this spatialised vision of reconciliation in their work in various disciplines, including urban planning, political and legal geographies, political science and international development. However, currently this work is largely occurring in silos, with potentially fertile grounds for mutual engagement and learning overlooked. What is more, there seems to be something of a divide between those theorists working from a background in peace and conflict studies, who have a rich, nuanced understanding of the concept of reconciliation but little engagement with the spatial, and those who foreground spatial aspects – often from traditions of geography and planning – but focus less on the deeper theoretical aspects of reconciliation. In this paper I advocate bringing these elements together in order to see what insights might emerge when we explicitly seek to understand the processes of reconciliation as spatial phenomena.

This approach is situated within the growing subfield of peace geographies which seek to put peace at the heart of geographical research, including Kobayashi (2009) and responses to this by Megoran (2011) and Williams and McConnell (2011) as well as scholarship on questions such as geographies of antiviolence (Loyd 2012) or the constantly evolving relationship between space and peace(s) (Koopman 2011). These writers have demonstrated that although the discipline of geography has long claimed to address questions of war and peace, in reality the emphasis has been firmly on researching war and violence. This, they suggest, represents a missed opportunity. After all, peace is 'inherently spatial' and 'always shaped by the spaces through which it is produced and reproduced' (Megoran and McConnell 2014, 19).

Taking a geographical approach to the notion of reconciliation provides new insights from the deployment of central geographical concepts such as space, place and scale. Concurrently, this paper also speaks to the spatial turn in peace and conflict studies, the contours of which are elegantly sketched in Bjoerkdahl and Buckley-Zistel's recent work (2016). Exploring the spatial element of reconciliation represents a further opportunity to explore the synergies between peace geographies and peace and conflict studies. This paper will reveal remarkable similarities in the way notions of space and reconciliation are conceptualised by theorists operating in the fields of geography and peace and conflict studies, and much to gain by bringing the two concepts into closer dialogue.

Theorising reconciliation

Reconciliation has become something of a buzzword in recent years. It is at the heart of international responses to violent conflicts and their aftermath, and has become widely recognised across the world thanks to emblematic reconciliation initiatives such as South Africa's post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And yet for all the attention paid to it, there has too often been a lack of clarity regarding the precise meaning of the term 'reconciliation' (Pankhurst 1999). Indeed, it is this very lack of clarity that may have contributed to the popularity of reconciliation as a concept, leading, at best, to its flexible and reflexive application in challenging circumstances, and at worst to its deployment as a woolly and ineffective would-be panacea. This paper will adopt a definition of reconciliation that draws on three central elements: an acknowledgement that reconciliation is about the restoration of relationships between people, that it is both a goal and a process and that it should be understood as situated – both culturally and (crucially for this paper) spatially.

Relationships are at the heart of this concept. As Lederach notes 'relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long term solution' (1997, 26). This vision is shared by numerous writers who emphasise the centrality of restoring good relations (between individuals, between groups) in the project of reconciliation. While some focus on the restoration of trust to relationships (Worthington and Drinkard 2000), others insist on an approach to reconciliation that acknowledges the role of human needs and emotions (Nadler 2002) or on resetting or reframing relationships that have been damaged by violence or conflict (Bloomfield 2006). What is common to all is the sense that even after violence on the largest scale, reconciliation still plays out at the level of human relationships.

The lack of clarity that at times bedevils discussions of reconciliation can perhaps arise from the question of whether reconciliation should be understood as target or process. Is it an outcome in which good relationships have been restored, or the sum of the

steps taken to reach this lofty aim? Bloomfield cuts through this confusion by suggesting that reconciliation is in fact 'both process and outcome' (2006, 6). It is, he argues, the shared future and remade relationship that affected societies seek to attain, and also the process through which they move towards this future. Seeing this as both outcome and process is particularly useful in helping sustain momentum during the time-consuming and often painful path towards reconciliation. While the idea of reconciling with a group that has caused unimaginable suffering to you (the outcome) may seem an impossible task, the smaller steps along the way (the process) are often more manageable.

Finally, reconciliation is contextually and culturally situated. Contextually, because the work to be done, the type of damage to relationships that needs repairing, will depend greatly on the violence that pre-empted it. Culturally, because as Galtung reminds us, all reconciliation practices are 'embedded in dense nets of assumptions, some of them cultural' (2001, 89). There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to reconciliation; it is influenced by and in turn influences the culture and context it is situated in. This paper seeks to make the argument that reconciliation can also be understood as spatially situated, and that seeing in this way will enable theorists and practitioners to gain greater insight into it.

There is broad agreement that a number of main components commonly fall under the 'umbrella' of reconciliation (Bloomfield 2006, 12). These include uncovering truth, acknowledging harm by offenders – and by extension the expression of remorse by these offenders, some form of justice, forgiveness, a resumption of the relationship that had been damaged and a rebuilding of trust (Santa-Barbara 2007). These all represent possible actions that can contribute to reconciliation. The challenge, then, is how to achieve these elements – what instruments can be introduced to uncover 'truth' or gain justice? What type of intervention can make forgiveness more likely?

Again, there are a number of options. Nadler (2002) proposes a model that differentiates between 'socio-emotional' reconciliation (centred on the acts of apology and forgiveness, such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions) and 'instrumental' reconciliation (which is based on mutual cooperation to achieve shared goals, which could include community work projects). Crucially, Nadler suggests that the most effective approach to reconciliation combines both elements. Another pathway towards reconciliation is suggested by the 'contact hypothesis', which states that greater contact between groups leads to decreased prejudice and increased trust. It has been widely re-examined in recent years with overwhelmingly positive results (Gibson and Claassen 2010; Dixon et al. 2010; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006),

though some scholars have noted that intergroup contact may be counter-productive in the context of serious asymmetries of power (Maoz 2011; Bekerman 2007).

Exploring the relationship between space and reconciliation – current research and new avenues

Before considering spatialised approaches to reconciliation in more detail, it is vital to set out clearly what is meant by the term 'space' in this context. This paper adopts the three-part understanding of space set out by Doreen Massey (2005), which views space as a product of social relations, a sphere of heterogeneity and something that is constantly being made and remade. For Massey, space is an event, a particular moment in the intersection of social relations and personal histories. As a definition, this bears remarkable similarities to the way that some writers speak about reconciliation. Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela – one-time member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – has described reconciliation as the process of 'making public spaces intimate' (2008). That is, reconciliation is the moment that space is transformed by a reconfiguration of the social relations that produce it, just as this space, its heterogeneity and malleability, makes reconciliation possible. Lederach (1997) also employs the language of space to explain reconciliation as 'a social space' that both accommodates and enables the diverse and sometimes paradoxical needs of a healing society. Reconciliation is 'a space, a place or location of encounter where parties to a conflict meet' (1997, 30). It is within these definitions, where space is seen as constituted by social relationships, as inherently diverse and shifting, and reconciliation is conceived of as a space of encounter, diversity and intimacy, that the first hints of the power of bringing both concepts into the same sphere of inquiry emerge. The following sections will seek to unravel these common threads to suggest a number of areas where research into these relationships is ongoing or should be pursued.

The built environment as facilitator of reconciliation

One area in which research is already being carried out into the relationship between space and reconciliation – though it is not necessarily always recognised as such – centres on the capacity of the built environment to create spaces where reconciliation can take place. Urban spaces in particular have always had a significant relationship with the communities that build and live in them, being at once constituted by and constitutive of the diverse publics residing there. Numerous writers identify the plurality of the city, the experience of 'being together with strangers' that is at the heart of city life, as being the defining characteristic of urban space (Stroëmbom and Bjoërkdahl 2015, 26; Coward 2009; Pullan and Baillie 2013). The city is not only defined by this heterogeneity, it makes this possible through the range of public

spaces it provides (Hansen 1993). Understood in this way, urban space has a clear potential to support intergroup contact, and often occupies an important role in literature on divided and contested societies, particularly as it addresses the question of unequal access to space. Access to space, and restrictions on this, have repeatedly been shown to reflect and perpetuate inequalities, whether this is according to social class, which Lefebvre saw as 'inscribed in space' (1991a, 68), gender (see Fenster's (2005) critique of the right to the gendered city) or something else. Inequality of access to space and the very different ways different groups might therefore experience the same space, may have serious consequences for their ability to access and participate fully in the 'space of encounter' that enables reconciliation.

Within the disciplines of geography and urban planning in particular there is a growing body of literature that asks how shared spaces can facilitate contact, and by extension reconciliation, in divided societies, and how this can be supported through planning and governance strategies, including Nagle's (2009) work on Beirut and Gaffikin et al. (2016) on Belfast. Crucially, these approaches caution against a return to the 'design determinism' of the mid-20th century, which posited the built environment as a means of controlling the way people act (Coaffee 2016). Instead they focus on the urban landscape as a mirror of societal relations and tensions (Brand and Fregonese 2016), on the process of designing and building together as a moment of opportunity (Healey 2006) and on the role of the built environment as a mediator for the constructive expression and resolution of the conflicts and tensions that are inherent to plural urban living (Pullan and Baillie 2013; Bjo€rkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016). This is not restricted to urban space – in rural communities built spaces such as marketplaces, wells and religious buildings have long played a role in bringing community members together. Although existing literatures focus more on urban spaces, the role of the built environment in enabling reconciliation in rural communities would represent a fruitful avenue for research.

These approaches are implicitly linked to the contact theory of reconciliation discussed earlier. They see public space, if it can be accessed equally by all groups in society and if it allows for free association and sharing of ideas, as an important tool in reducing tensions between groups, and increasing understanding. Such ideas have begun to gain currency with groups working directly on the promotion and measurement of reconciliation. In its most recent Reconciliation Barometer, the South Africa based Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (Hofmeyr and Govender 2015) emphasised the vital role of shared public spaces in addressing stubbornly low levels of interaction between South Africans from different ethnic groups. Understanding the politics of space, especially questions of access, could also explain why reconciliation fails to happen. If reconciliation represents a reconfiguration of the social relations that make space,

then the persistence of stubborn inequalities in these relations can also be identified through the effects they produce in space.

For some it is the process of planning and designing the spaces we inhabit, rather than the end product, that can facilitate peaceful relations between groups. Collaborative or participatory planning practices, such as those advocated by Patsy Healey (1992 2006), apply Habermasian principles of communicative rationality to the planning process, using them as a tool through which, even in the most conflictual of circumstances, communities can find 'a way of living together differently, through struggling to make sense together' (Healey 1992, 152). This approach places as much emphasis on the process of planning as on its content, seeing this as an opportunity to bring together groups with radically opposed priorities or beliefs, moving towards consensus and mutual understanding while grappling with concrete planning proposals. There are clear echoes of the instrumental model of reconciliation (which envisions communities working together to achieve shared goals) within this practice.

Spatial barriers to reconciliation

Just as space may help to create the conditions for reconciliation, whether through facilitating intergroup contact or providing an opportunity for divided communities to work fruitfully together, it can also throw up barriers. As Nagle puts it 'space is the central matrix on which ethno-national separation is constituted' (2009, 327). There is therefore a rich body of literature on ways in which space can divide communities and prevent reconciliation. Space is a resource for the expression of identities, which gain a sense of solidity and permanence through their physical manifestation (Connerton 1989). In divided and contested societies these physical manifestations of identity take on a heightened significance as markers of difference, boundary markers between 'us' and 'them'. For this reason scholarship has abounded looking at the role of spatial markers of ethno-national identity in contested societies, including work on monuments, ethnicised building types and emblematic buildings or places (Johnson 2002; Forest and Johnson 2002). Bevan argues that 'architecture takes on a totemic quality' (2007, 8), whereby the destruction of the physical environment also strikes at a community's identity, sense of belonging and memories. Of course, a number of writers have pointed out that these attacks on urban space as constitutive of and witness to heterogeneity are not confined to times of war. Urbicide by way of discriminatory planning practices represents 'the dark side of the discipline of urban planning that is rarely acknowledged' (Graham 2004, 34) and is the subject of a vibrant branch of writing on urban planning (for example, Weizman (2007) on Israel and Bollens (1998) on Jerusalem and Johannesburg).

Finally, physical interventions in space – including but not limited to walls, barriers, road systems or bridges – have long been used explicitly as tools of segregation, preventing prospects for reconciliation. Rural space is not exempt from this, as the devastating impact of the

'peace wall' erected by the Israeli government on Palestinian farming communities vividly demonstrates. The question of land ownership often plays a central role in divided societies (see Ntsebeza (2010) on South Africa and Morrow et al. (2000) on Northern Ireland). This also has a spatial expression, whether through the erection of fences and other means of restricting access to the land or through the visibly different uses of plots (for example, commercial versus subsistence farming) that represent and measure at a glance the seemingly insurmountable distance between communities. The experience of South Africa underlines the importance of such divisions of space, and the displacement of marginalised communities from these spaces, for efforts to foster reconciliation. Here post-apartheid reconciliation has repeatedly been undermined by persistent and ethnicised land inequality based in the historic deprivation of black people's land and property under apartheid, with black South Africans pursuing land restitution (actual and symbolic) as crucial to their pursuit of sustainable peace and justice (Gibson 2009). From Israel–Palestine to local-level conflicts around gentrification, the dislocation of a conflict party from an emblematic space produces significant barriers to finding the space of encounter that facilitates reconciliation.

Formal spaces of reconciliation

Some tools and approaches that are associated with the pursuit of reconciliation in divided societies require the development of formal spaces where these processes can play out. As such, a third area of interest within a spatialised notion of reconciliation is represented by the formal spaces, the tribunals, courts and commissions, etc., that make up much of the visible landscape of reconciliation. These bodies vary as widely in legislative and institutional status as they do in form and location, ranging from monumental international institutions in The Hague to the rural Gacaca courts used in post-Genocide Rwanda, often held in the open air and in small villages. Such spaces have increasingly become the focus of enquiry for geographers interested in 'understanding transitional justice by exploring the spaces through which judicial processes operate and the spatial imaginaries they bring into being (Jeffrey 2011, 344). Researchers working in this area have interrogated the tensions engendered by the distance often present between sites of violence and the mechanisms set up to investigate them (Jeffrey 2011; Oglesby and Ross 2009). Other research into the spatiality of institutions of transitional justice has emphasised the impact of the physical experience of crossing the threshold of a war crimes court (Jeffrey and Jakala 2014), and explored the nature of a criminal tribunal as a space of performance where

justice must be 'seen to be done' (Hughes 2015). The creation of spaces that complicate distinctions between local, national and international represents another fruitful area for researchers concerned with understanding the architecture of transitional justice and reconciliation. Inwood et al.'s work on local level Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Detroit and Greensboro (USA) demonstrates how activists 'discursively connect' these bodies to their counterparts at the international level in order to lend legitimacy to the spaces of reconciliation they seek to open up (2016, 60).

While some formalised spaces of reconciliation are tied to the diverse institutions of transitional justice, others are created as an output of instrumental projects of reconciliation. This results in the construction of a new space, or the transformation of an old one, which is simultaneously constitutive and representative of the reconciliation process. Such spaces might include sacred commemorative spaces built by communities in Sierra Leone following the devastating conflict there (Kaïndeneh 2012), or community theatres established to bring communities together in arts-based reconciliation programmes (Breed 2014). Finally, the thriving field of scholarship concerned with monuments, memorials and other commemorative spaces deals quite frequently with the question of reconciliation. Erecting a monument, whether by the governing authorities or by non-elite groups, can be a powerful tool to acknowledge past wrongs and give voice to victims' experience, something that is all the more powerful when anchored in the landscape in bricks and mortar (Connerton 1989). Commemorative spaces in places as diverse as Kyrgyzstan (Harrowell 2015), South Africa (Marschall 2010) and Chile (Baxter 2005) have all been examined by researchers, their role in promoting – or obstructing – reconciliation subjected to critical scrutiny.

Everyday spaces of reconciliation

The processes of reconciliation cannot be contained within the neat boundaries of such formally identified spaces, however. For these processes to be at all successful they must impact the daily lives and practices of the relevant communities. Further research into a fourth area would be fruitful – the everyday spaces that become transformed by processes of reconciliation, their meaning and quality shifted. This focus on the everyday, what Lefebvre defined as both ordinary and repetitive, "what is left over" after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out by analysis' (1991b, 97), draws on the important body of recent geographical scholarship that underlines the significance of the quotidian. It takes its cue from feminist scholarship on gendered experiences of the everyday and how these both reflect and affect the spatial structuring of the public realm (McDowell 1999; Smith 1987). These approaches see the inherent power of everyday experiences – the spaces, objects and temporalities that we engage with most

frequently – as undervalued and under investigated. To quote Horton and Kraftl's convincing call to understand everyday children's geographies, 'the "everydayness" of the everyday is often assumed, and is left begging critique' (2006, 72).

This is certainly true in work on reconciliation, in which formal spaces such as those discussed above often occupy the spotlight. However, on deeper reflection the literatures on reconciliation and divided societies do allow us to identify a range of everyday spaces that have become spaces of reconciliation by dint of the activities that take place there. These were not created with the goal of facilitating reconciliation, but have become an important constituent part of these processes. They include elements of the rural environment – rivers, forests, hills – that assume central roles in ceremonies and rituals of reconciliation in urban communities. Numerous researchers have highlighted how rivers are used to bathe and purify former child soldiers to enable them to successfully reconcile with their communities following the civil war in Sierra Leone (Stark 2006; Tursunova 2008). Similar practices exist in Angola, where former combatants were taken into the bush in order to undergo ritual treatments to allow them to return to the community (Honwana 1998). In these cases and others, spaces within the rural environment take on a symbolic meaning and purpose within the framework of reconciliation practices, and are transformed by this meaning for the duration of the practice (and perhaps longer). In urban contexts, toilets in an ethnically segregated school in post-conflict Mostar became a place where students could transgress the strict ethnicised spatial order of the city for a time (Hromadzic 2011). Elsewhere, Jeffrey identified the 'invented spaces of transnational justice' created by the outreach strategies of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), including 'Coffee shops, homes, university campuses and individual human bodies' as spaces that are drawn into the practice of transitional justice (Jeffrey 2011, 354).

The diversity of these spaces is striking, and prompts a number of questions for future inquiry. First, are some 'everyday' spaces more conducive to reconciliation than others? What can be learned from this? Second, how does the experience of reconciliation change the nature of the space? Does the memory of reconciliation live on, having made an indelible mark on the nature of the space, changing its meaning and impact on the people that use it, or is its identity as a space of reconciliation transient? The answers to these questions are not clear, but work towards answering them would greatly help us to understand the relationship between space and reconciliation processes.

Conclusion

The examples above highlight the value of viewing reconciliation through a spatial lens, and begin to bring together the explorations of this theme occurring across different disciplines. Through this initial overview we can begin to see how spatial interventions can support or impede the processes of reconciliation, how spaces of reconciliation can be both formally constituted or become transformed by the relationship-building that takes place there, and how space is an important factor in a range of approaches to reconciliation, including instrumental and contact-based interventions and the use of transitional justice mechanisms.

Seen in this way the notion of reconciliation is inherently spatial – it draws on space as a resource just as it brings about transformations in the spaces where its processes occur. This paper begins to highlight a range of potential areas for future research, including the role of rural space in facilitating or hindering reconciliation (since much work so far has focused on the issue of divided cities); the afterlife of formal and informal spaces of reconciliation; and the potential for participatory planning practices to be integrated into instrumental and contact-based approaches to reconciliation, to name just a few.

Despite the spatial turn in peace and conflict studies and the increasingly vibrant scholarship in the field of peace geographies, there remain significant challenges to bringing these disciplines into dialogue. Too many peace and conflict theorists still understand space as a vessel, while many geographers struggle to conceive of reconciliation beyond the narrow scope of a TRC or tribunal. Too often inquiries focus on formal, monumental or symbolic elements of reconciliation and spatial interventions even though, as shown above, some of the most important intersections between space and reconciliation occur in the everyday and informal spheres.

This paper seeks to address this by providing a more nuanced point of departure – a view of space and reconciliation as mutually constitutive, intricately interrelated and continuously being remade. Both concepts are hence simultaneously understood as process and outcome and these conceptual similarities could be exploited to great effect, building on a similar approach advocated for by Koopman (2011) with regards to peace. Interrogating the dynamic relationship between space and reconciliation – where space is made intimate and provides the conditions for intimacy with the other – allows us to better understand the complex processes of reconciliation, and to intervene more effectively in support of the remaking of fractured social relations in the aftermath of conflict.

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