



Book review: *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies*

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Landau, F., Pohl, L., and Roskamm, N. (Eds.): *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 249 pp., ISBN 978-3-8376-5073-0, EUR 50.00, 2021.

Post-foundational theory departs from the absence of a constitutive and absolute ground for the foundation of the social, such as the essence of human being, rationalism, historical materialism or god. Yet, post-foundationalists refrain from an anti-foundational stance, as for instance post-structuralism or radical constructivism suggests. Heavily shaped by the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, post-foundationalism centers on the creation of difference as a founding mechanism of society and introduces the central concepts (*counter*)hegemony and *contingency* in a post-Marxist and Gramsci-oriented manner. While the attention to Mouffe's and Laclau's work seemingly declined in the past years, the sociologist Oliver Marchart further conceptualized post-foundationalism through transforming Heidegger's theory of an ontological difference to an ontology of political difference.

Within the debates on the universality, particularity and subsequently the (absence of an) ultimate grounding of the social, post-foundational thought lives a shadow existence within political theory (for instance Beck, 2006; Sandel, 2009; McGowan, 2020; Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012) or is reduced to a variation of post-structuralism (for instance Habermas, 2020). However, after years of almost invisibility, these never really concluded debates still exist and post-foundationalism continues to claim relevance for social theory. The book *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies* convincingly demonstrates the relevance of this theoretical approach. The book takes an important step in thinking of this theoretical approach from the angle of geography. Thereby, it provides important conceptual contributions to geography as a discipline and the study of space in rela-

tion to power, discourse and hegemony. It also fills the gap of underdeveloped notions of space within post-foundational theory and enhances its relevance for current debates within academia and political practice.

From this point of departure, the volume *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies* connects multiple post-foundational approaches with the theoretical and practical tools from geography. The book's stated aim is "to bring together post-foundational thinking and the field of knowledge and practice that constitutes and is constituted by spatial and urban matters" (p. 10). Precisely this attentive analysis of the reciprocal (re)production of the political and the social – the simultaneous process of grounding and ungrounding – creates a refreshing and innovative angle to theory and practice within geography. The volume features topics from many different disciplines, such as architecture, spatial planning, political theory and psychoanalysis. A central theme is the disruptive quality of space: politics is constituted, or grounded, within space, yet this grounding remains contestable. Thereby, the book achieves more than simply contributing to a theoretical discourse on the negotiation over (counter)-hegemonies within space. It also reflects on political practice – or in terms of post-foundationalism on the politization of the spatial – and thereby is an interesting read not only for scholars interested in theory, but also for practitioners.

Divided into three sections, *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies* discusses the theoretical role of space in post-foundational theory, develops concepts of grounding and ungrounding as geographical approach, and reflects case studies in light of a post-foundational reading of space. In the introduction, the editors Friederike Landau, Lucas Pohl and Nikolai Roskamm present the groundwork of post-foundational thought, its main concepts and debates, and outline the relevant dimensions of a spatial lens on post-

foundationalism. In the first contribution in the section on “Theoretical (Re)Positionings”, Lucas Pohl and Erik Swynedouw emphasize the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In a spatial reading of Lacan, they highlight a somewhat contradictory relationship between a productive yet impossible attempt to locate the Lacanian “Real” within the world. Jens Kaae Fisker encounters post-foundationalism in the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham. Parallel to Laclau’s association of dislocation of meaning within the temporal, Jens Kaae Fisker argues for the disruptive potential within the spatial, referring to Gibson-Graham’s concept of space. Nikolai Roskamm presents a post-foundational reading of Lefebvre. The initial tension is the need of totality as “a necessary target for thinking and acting”, while such a totality is ultimately impossible within the premises of post-foundationalism. Roskamm follows Lefebvre’s ontology of the city, in which the city’s essence is revealed by its extreme cases. Here Agamben’s state of exception is introduced and a topological explanation of modernity is attempted via a provocative reference to the borderline case of Auschwitz. A reprint of the 2015 published article “Institution and Dislocation” by Oliver Marchart develops an advanced understanding of space. Marchart critiques the work of Laclau through Doreen Massey’s conceptualization of space. While Laclau approaches space as socially constructed, Marchart includes the social sphere as spatially constructed, therefore substantiating the disruptive quality of space for the social sphere. He criticizes the dichotomies space–time, and the social–political in parts of post-foundational thought. As an alternative, he proposes an intertwined reading of these pairs as two “the same thing in a different mode” (p. 111). Matthew G. Hannah discusses post-foundationalism within the work of Badiou. He opposes Marchart’s critique of Badiou as a Manichean thinker without interest in everyday empirical politics. Contrary to Marchart, Hannah highlights post-foundational elements in the work of Badiou and his interest in everyday landscapes. Mark Davidson and Kurt Iveson revisit Rancière from a post-foundational angle. The latter’s argument that “politics are based on a miscount” (p. 134) is included in a spatial terminology of post-foundationalism.

The second section of the book offers a conceptual engagement with geography and its practices and vocabularies. Friederike Landau critically adapts Mouffe’s work on conflicts in the public. She develops a basis for thinking agonism, publicness and spatiality in mutual relations. Clint Burnham relates to a psychoanalytical angle and roots the unconscious within space and connects it with work on cognitive mapping and indigenous knowledge. Lucas Pohl and Paul Kingsbury engage with the spatial dimension of Žižek and provide a post-foundational reading of space in the work of the Slovenian philosopher. Through theory triangulation, Tomas Marttila provides a relational conceptualization of the market and demonstrates the potential of post-foundationalism for political economy and sociology.

In the last section “Post-Foundationalism in the City” the theoretical and conceptual framework of post-foundationalism is applied and discussed in the context of urban politics. Gabu Heindl and Drehli Robnik reflect the implication of radical democracy on the “nonsolution” – neither a solution, nor a lack thereof – for social housing. Anneleen Kenis and Matthias Lievens discuss the spatial imagination and construction of air pollution as a localization of climate struggles and approach the urban political struggle for clean air in London from a spatial lens. Sören Groth approaches urban mobility practices from a conflict-oriented understanding in the example of pedestrian takeover of streets and of fare dodging. Mohamed Saleh analyzes public protests in Cairo and Alexandria and proposes a more nuanced and complex understanding of hope. In the last contribution, Daniel Mullis discusses the protests against the EU’s austerity measures in Athens and analyzes the production of public space in the practice of resistance, as well as the politization through space.

The contributions to the volume do not constitute a fully cohesive and delimited framework, but rather a collection of approaches that interrelate, create a dialogue, sometimes contradict, and thereby invite the reader to enter the discussions of post-foundationalism within and beyond geography. This multitude reflects the underlying diversity of influences for post-foundationalism, ranging from Derrida and Heidegger to Marx and Lacan. Especially the not unproblematic relationship to the “openly conservative and anti-Semitic” thinker Heidegger is (self-)critically addressed, and alternative groundings of post-foundationalism via Lacan are proposed in the volume. Here, *[Un]grounding: Post-Foundational Geographies* does not eschew conflict and friction and positions post-foundational thought as a fruitful and promising approach for geography. The thematically and linguistically attentive editing turns the carefully curated and interrelated theoretical and practical considerations into a thought-provoking read.

In light of the roots of post-foundationalism in Mouffe’s and Laclau’s work on hegemony and socialist struggle, the predominant absence of Mouffe and the concept of hegemony are slightly surprising. The lack of a spatial dimension in especially Mouffe’s work is substituted by the prominent adaptation of Marchart’s work on political difference. The diverse topics and theoretical groundings in the volume are extremely diverse and refreshing – especially compared to the partly outdated debates of left-populism and counter-hegemonies, which are usually associated with Laclau’s and Mouffe’s work. This makes the volume a relevant read for an utter diversity of disciplines and political struggles and invites the readers to [un]ground their own research and practice apart from debates on Mouffe’s disputed work.

The focus of the case studies on urban planning, architecture, human geography and urban studies slightly obscures the identified “need to address the totality”. Transnational perspectives are not very present in the discussions

on practices. This is unfortunate, as the conceptual and theoretical discussions open several doors of rethinking post-foundational geographies for instance through a reference back to Marxism or the inclusion of perspectives from the “Global South”. Nonetheless, the book constitutes an important and innovative starting point for such endeavors and builds a solid theoretical ground for future discussions.

The volume is a highly recommendable source of innovative thought and raises the expectation of further impulses from post-foundational geographies. It positions the role of space as the realm, in which hegemonic fixations are stabilized but also contested. Thereby, the volume provides a new access to the still relevant discussions on particular identities and universal ideals. Several years after the abrupt end of debates over cosmopolitanism, this work on the [un]grounding potential of space provides refreshing ideas. It is a must-read for anyone involved in “the field of knowledge and practice that constitutes and is constituted by spatial and urban matters” (p. 10).

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