Dead Ground

Fallacies of Understanding Global Divides, Policy-Making and Communication

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Abstract

This chapter addresses cultural production and global divides from a media geographer's point of view by introducing 'dead ground' as its central concept. This concept is borrowed from strategic thinking, originally a military term, and refers to ground that cannot be observed or experienced empirically – but (in this case) is often subjected to inference based on conventional thinking, 'common knowledge' based on experiences from other systems, or other epistemological environments that do not necessarily bear the required truth value. 'Dead ground' is explored as an ontological and epistemological concept, related to fallacies that are present in the globalisation discussion. It will particularly analyse three different fallacies: the single trajectory fallacy, the single rationality fallacy, and the single moral fallacy.

The chapter raises the question as to whether these fallacies have been inherent in Western media studies, and if they have, if they might have facilitated cognitive colonisation of the analysis of changing cultures.

Keywords: dead ground, space, globalisation, Eastern Europe, policymaking

Unknown Unknowns

> There are known knowns. There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. (Donald Rumsfeldt, US Secretary of Defence, 2002)

The starting statement is taken from Donald Rumsfeldt's 12th February 2002 press briefing,[1] held at the Pentagon, and relates to US operations against al Qaeda. In hindsight the sadly ironic twist of this statement is striking. At the time, however, it earned the Secretary of Defence the 'Foot in the Mouth' award for his usage of English language. Although intended in part to be tongue in cheek, Donald Rumsfeld gave quite an accurate definition for what is *'dead ground'* and its significance in global, military thinking. Rumsfeldt's 'unknown unknown' is the highest form of ignorance, something you cannot seek because you don't know that it exists. It is a 'dead ground'.

The concept of 'dead ground' is borrowed from strategic thinking and is originally a military term. It refers to ground that cannot be observed or experienced empirically – but is often subjected to inference based on 'common knowledge', that is conventional

thinking based on experiences from other systems or cultures. Dead ground is hidden from an observer because of man-made obstacles, natural hindrance or because of the differing epistemological and ontological frame. (Salovaara-Moring 2009a)

My point of departure is *how our sense-making of global divides is always* shadowed by dead ground because sense-making is implicitly *territorial and temporal*. As such it is always prone to several fallacies. Thus this chapter introduces the concept of dead ground as an aid to understanding fallacies that concern global divides, policy-making, and communication in certain historical and geopolitical contexts. Moreover, it takes a critical look at cultural production and communication at a macro-level, in an empirical context, building on examples from my own research into transitional Eastern European countries as well as conflict-ridden areas of Caucasus.

Dead Ground, Change, and Complexities of Cultural Space

Martin Heidegger described the event which we now call globalization as "planetary imperialism of technologically organized man", which as an "organized uniformity" becomes the surest instrument of total rule over the Earth (Heidegger 1977: 152). In many cases this 'technologically organized man' can be located in Western hemisphere industrialized societies with an extensive history of colonialism.

Hence, it is not only Western epistemology that is based on knowledge-production that strives for control, prediction, and minimising uncertainty. Technology has also been engaged in the same mission: control, access, governance, and rule of territories. Moreover, Western politics and policy-thinking is often based on belief in linear systems: that is a belief that the arrangement of nature, social life, cultural productions, and its complications is one where outputs are proportional to inputs. Furthermore, one where the whole is equal to the sum of its parts, and where cause and effect are observable and quantifiable. It is an environment where careful planning facilitates prediction; where success is pursued by detailed monitoring and control; and where a premium is placed upon reductionism: rewarding those who excel in reductionist processes. Reductionist analysis and policy-making consists of taking large, complex problems and reducing them to manageable chunks.

However, many changing societies are nonlinear systems, which means the arrangement of nature, life and its complications – such as new technologies, or media systems in developing democratic order – are systems where inputs and outputs are not proportional, where the whole is not quantitatively equal to its parts, or even, qualitatively recognizable in its constituent components, and here cause and effect are not evident. This is an environment where phenomena are unpredictable but, within bounds, self-organizing. One, where unpredictability frustrates conventional planning, where solution as self-organization defeats control, and where the 'bounds' are the actionable variable; requiring new ways of thinking and acting.

The collapse of communism and its consequential chains of events in the Soviet borderlands offer a good example of nonlinear systems and unforeseeable trajectories. When in the early 1990s communism collapsed, it brought a sudden end to the Cold War and lead to the independence of fourteen Central and Eastern European countries, in addition to eight more in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The collapse of state-run socialism also brought about a fundamental reorientation in scientific thought. Due to its

close proximity to 'Europe proper', Central Eastern Europe formed a social and political laboratory, a 'terra incognita' of post-utopian time.

The region itself became *dead ground* in social sciences: old concepts and theories did not apply in this new context because social structures were in flux. Most importantly, it was *tabula rasa* for capitalism: something to be used and exploited. Given the situation, it is ironic that it was Marx (1867/1968) who once said: "people don't make their own history as they please but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." In many cases frozen territorial conflicts (Kosovo), old ethnic boundaries mixed with religious conflicts (the Balkans), and even tribal cleavages (Caucasus region) resurfaced on the political landscape.

Eastern European countries can be considered as laboratories of democracy containing 'media laboratories' that were forced to adjust to the development of changing societies as well *economic globalisation*. Those systems that seem to have worked in the West were initially accepted because there was no time for extensive experimentation. Media system crafting was based on imitation rather than invention. The route leading towards the more stable and mature European democracies and a free, accountable media did not prove to be the predictable one-way path towards higher democratic standards that observers tended to believe. In many cases democracy, media systems, and economy were crafted simultaneously (see for example Jakubowicz 2007; Splichal 2001, 1994; Sparks with Reading 1998; O'Neill et al.1998; O'Neill 1997). However, following its introduction, it was capitalism that became the force that modified the other two systems.

In my studies on post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, I encountered several fallacies that come out of cultural misunderstandings of *dead ground*. Often they are based on a Eurocentric or Anglo-Saxon normative understanding of how things should go, not how they actually evolve. Moreover, they are related to imported Western policy-making practices that are implemented in a hybrid surrounding consisting of inherited Communist practices and newly adopted rules of liberal capitalism. In the following pages, I will focus on three fallacies caused by these misunderstandings. These are the single trajectory fallacy, the single rationality fallacy, and the single moral fallacy.

Single Trajectory Fallacy: Spatial and Temporal Dead Ground

The first fallacy, the single trajectory fallacy, arrives from the presumption that all countries in transition are standing in queue, waiting to catch up with the West and arrive at some teleological end-state of an idealized model of capitalism, democracy, and communication. Developing countries are '*panoptized*' by the Western gaze by measuring their performance against benchmarks that are other than their own. These countries often face the obligation of following that path, whether through the development of administrative, media, or other policies, in order to be considered a good student of the West. It is obvious that the aforementioned teleological end-state does not exist. Moreover, there is no transit from one politico-economic stage to another. This fallacy is often a result of encountering spatial and temporal *dead ground*.

The *spatial* aspect refers to misunderstanding the borders, territories, and dynamics of the space of a given society. Western understanding of space is explicitly attached to

the concept of political borders and, through that, to the territory's governance and their people. Through this perspective, states are the only legal actors on the international political stage. However, in many countries, borders set by post war treaties and international agreements are seen as contrary to the real borders (such as Hungary in 1918, and the problematic delineation of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia). This means that habitat, for example, instead of a political border can be regarded as the true boundary.

Every cultural and regional entity has its internal borders and frontiers, the most important being between ethnic majority/minorities, historical/or religious and urban and rural. They are not official but can function as *hard borders* that have their own set of norms and values. The more prevalent or potent the internal border and frontier, the greater the level of instability can be expected. A typical example could be the hostile attitude towards ethnic groups that moved to a region during a time of oppression or as a part of the colonising political power. These ethnic groups include for example Russians in Latvia and Estonia but one could also mention many others around the world such as the French pied-noir in their former colonies in Africa, the British white settlers in Zimbabwe, or Asians in Fiji.

In many parts of the world, the identity of peoples and their collective rights tend to be bound to a notion of territoriality associated with responsibilities in relation to a given area, which are defined as *collective spaces*. These collective spaces may include human groups (both living and ancestral), forests, animals, watercourses, and so on. This difference in worldviews becomes apparent when exploitation of natural resources is driven by multinationals that base their exploitation on the right to property whilst the alternative voices of *collective space* are seldom heard. (de Sousa Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007: 9). In addition, historical colonialisation of natural resources of now independent states, continue to create conflicts and re-modify the power geography of access and governance of oil, gas, and the spaces through which they can be transported (for example, the Baltic Sea and Caucasus region).

The *temporal* aspect of *dead ground* refers to the fact that all cultural phenomena are located in spaces that are defined by their own temporality: framed by a specific *scopic regime of time-space*. Understanding temporal dead ground means that one has to become aware of a historicity that defines not only the conditions of the present but also possible futures. Histories of competing ideologies, oppressed nationhood, instability or conflict create not one but multiple complex and controversial histories. As the young Kosovan journalist, Ilirjana Bajo Law (2008) put it: "Nations are like human beings. If they live in a constant state of denial, never making peace with the past, they can make no progress and will have no future." Controversial histories require an understanding of the *polyvocality of lived temporalities* – but also ruptures in temporalities.

As many of those journalists I have interviewed[2] have pointed out, both the people and the whole region are very rooted in the past. Faced with developments that are considered to be forced upon them and not embedded, people feel betrayed and this experience has not been properly acknowledged. At the same time, journalists were emphasising 'adaptability' – people who can adapt to situations easily, make adjustments easily to situations, and be flexible. That notion was reflexive of a new mentality brought by the *new capitalization* of cultural economy. (Salovaara-Moring 2009b; 2009c)

This mode of capitalization is inherited from the early 90s, when Eastern European media systems financially started from scratch. Media systems were crafted against

the historical experience of oppression and had little sympathy for regulation. In many places this created the most deregulated media system there is, both in terms of legislation and cultural production. In some cases policy-making was based on an imitation of European and Western best practice.

This development included some paradoxical features. The deregulation of media may well stand for freedom of expression, but it has also lead to surreptitious journalism: journalism that can be bought off by money or vested political and/or business interests. In many countries that developed new policies, there were great worries about what foreign investments in the media sector would lead to. Often these worries were well founded – the investors operated in 'dead ground'. However, this was not the case always. Sometimes, foreign ownership may have given greater freedom in a politically instable domestic situation by providing a stable financial basis (for example West-Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung Group in Bulgaria and Diena-Bonnier in Latvia).

At the same time, ideas of 'watchdog' news journalism were merely idealised self-images held by Western observers. In the new trans-national constellation it was evident that such a final destination did not exist to any broader extent, neither in the East nor the West. In this context it must also be said that the relationship between democracy and media is hampered by market logics even in more mature democracies. In these societies of change, however, the media economy experienced severe difficulties due to undeveloped advertisement sector and withdrawal of state subsidies. This, in many cases, created intimate connections between business and media sector.

Capitalism, like any human system of exchange, is always a historical and temporal construct. As sociologists, such as Gil Eyal, Iván Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley (1998), have pointed out: in Eastern Europe, capitalism was built without capitalists because the bourgeois class had been removed by state-socialism in the nationalisation of private property in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. Thus the concept of class or traditionally stratified democracy was more or less inapplicable in analysing alternative capitalisms. This does not mean that there would not be social stratification in these societies but it certainly did not follow the Western type of class society. This also meant that within cultural economies there were agents from different spheres. In many cases Eastern Europe leapfrogged intermediate stages and landed in neo-liberal corporate capitalism of a kind that media industries were just developing in the West. Paradoxically, for example, the Financial Times often applauded this development by taking 'New Europe' as a model with its flat taxes and deregulation by scolding 'Old Europe' with its stubborn inflexibility. (Salovaara-Moring 2009d).The East was progressive compared to the West, at least in global capitalism. The *single trajectory fallacy* was thus revealed to be a myth, and was actually turned back upon its proponents.

Single Rationality Fallacy: Epistemological Dead Ground

The second fallacy is called the *single rationality fallacy*. It is based on misunderstandings of epistemological dead ground. Single rationality fallacy refers to a misunderstanding according to which human societies live by 'Reason' that is a way of thinking characterized by logic, analysis, and synthesis. Reason attempts to discover what is true and what is best for everyone and thus, for every place. In this type of thinking,

logics, analysis, and synthesis are not culturally embedded. Moreover, this rationalistic view often contrasts itself with a pejorative conceptualisation of *emotionalism*, which is presented as thinking driven by desire, passion, or prejudice. That is a thinking mode reserved for 'traditional societies'.

However, reason is not only historically constructed but also territorially bounded. In Western thinking, the concept of 'reason' is attached to the notion of a 'functioning public sphere' where 'public sphere' is universally floating and culturally detached normative category of political critique. In recent media studies trust in reason has facilitated sociological analysis with simplified forms of the Habermasian theoretisation of a 'public sphere' especially when adapted to changing societies. The fallacy appears in universally accepted premises of deliberation that ignore and reject alternative logics of the everyday that were hampered by capitalist logics and thus seldom actualised in any societies.

In the early 1990s, the most significant requirements of evolving civil societies in Eastern Europe had to do with the social sphere including a functioning 'public sphere', with new practices of journalism that would support the consolidation of nationhood and democracy. That was a difficult task, given the mistrust that people felt towards politicians and also, partly, towards media. Newly appointed governments – while hailing freedom of regulation and even anti-regulative sentiments – in unofficial ways often exerted direct political pressure on public or state media, and interfered with commercial media and the press. However, at the time of transition, a new generation of journalists also appeared on the scene.

Journalism as a profession had deteriorated in status. Both in the West and the East, young journalists to a lesser extent see it as a 'holy vocation'. They either see it as an (often poorly) paid job when compared with many other professions, or then the motivation of young journalists is more on the side of self-expression than that of serving the public or acting as the 'watchdogs' of the political system. One version of the 'single reason fallacy' is actually not to focus on agents, and how their behaviour rationality may change over time and in space – the fallacy appears in the supposition that 'Western Reason' is both a universal and an unchanging entity embracing all territories equally.

Single Moral Fallacy:
Ontological Dead Ground

Ontological dead ground refers to imposing one's own cultural categories upon studied phenomena and societies. Every culture has its own specific ontological structure, *an epistemic regime* through which things and relations are seen as normal and acceptable to its subscribers. Ontological order includes cultural principles, how categories of time and space are understood, moral orders, meta-concepts like *good* versus *bad*, *divine* versus *evil*, and so forth. This is the operating system of a culture, part of the hardware that triggers resistance when it is violated.

Single moral fallacy refers to a fallacy that appears as a result of ontological dead ground. In its most typical form it appears as the *Mother knows best* syndrome. It is common to all dominant ideologies. The *Single Moral Fallacy* supposes that the 'Other' is incapable of governing himself according to alleged principles of "public good". Therefore this 'Other' must be confined to certain, often Western, economic rules and

policy practices – although these practices are made by men who are incapable of acting upon them themselves.

Typical confusion is created when forms of governance are exported from the outside to a region with different traditions. Liberal democracy, for example, is a loose group of Western cultural norms, traditions, and manners. Exporting political inventions (such as US-style institutions to Iraq or Eastern Europe) creates a Nietzchean dilemma where good intentions can create catastrophic consequences. The free market may represent freedom but if brought into a region where other systems are in flux it may pose a new type of threat with its hard economic liberalism. Ontological realisation of good in the new context is often exceeded by less wanted side effects.

The Western credo i.e. discussions on 'global citizenship or global media policy are often less than self-reflexive about their own ideological starting points. That is to say that the 'global' in these discussions is revealed to be more or less the same as 'Western'. Instead of being just broader 'imagined communities' they may often assume that Eurocentric or Anglocentric legal or political models (such as the neoliberal economic order, representative democracy, individualism, control over and often exploitation of natural resources) formed a single and accepted normative framework in all spatial and historical settings.

Public service broadcasting (PSB) gives us a clear example of where Western ideals/reason and economic and ideological realities of the region clashed during the first decade. The 'media boom' created markets that subordinated the public values of journalism, turning it into a commodity, and turning the 'public' into 'consumers'. Thus, the idea of serving the 'public' found the soil of the region particularly barren. Normative ideals of PSB were mostly imported from wealthy European countries with BBC-type of journalism, whereas these financially weak states could not provide a strong enough fiscal base for their state-financed media. Although Western European countries suffered from the deteriorating financial base of their public service broadcasters, the ideology of serving the 'public' was, however, deeply engrained.

As expressed by a Latvian professor Inta Brikse: "Television is making paid programmes because of the lack of public money. What that really means is that the producer is collecting money from those who want to be in a programme and then the channel is making this programme. Of course these kinds of programmes are damaging the image of Latvian TV. We are paying for the channel and we don't know when these attitudes are starting to affect the newscasts. The problem follows that the public opinion is that journalism is bought in Latvia." (in personal interview)

The interests of nation-building and the free market were often contradictory. In many cases, PSB companies were forced to finance their activities by selling advertising space or collecting fees for those who wanted to express their opinion in the public channel because the level of subsidies granted by the states were insufficient. Commercial broadcasters raised the same questions as in Western Europe: "What do we need state-financed media for when private companies can do it cheaper?" In theory PSB was good but in reality the enterprise was hard to actualise. The consequence of the single moral fallacy was that unrealistic models were maintained that may well have created more problems than they solved.

Conclusions

So, to summarise, the main claim of this chapter is that the discussion on globalisation and global divides is often conducted at an abstract macro level. However, all human practices, whether cultural production, media policymaking or reception, are always *located activities*. As such they are located very concretely in time and space and carry their own culturally-embedded ontological and epistemological sense-making. Policy discourses, just like other normative discourses, however, often claim to have a universal and normative status. Moreover, surprisingly often they are outcomes of Western ways of thinking. When good ideas result in bad outcomes, this may be because of false universalism and not of allegedly disobedient people, cultures, and societies that do not conform to Western ideas.

Modern international politics and related policy practices can be easily captured as *technologies of political subjects, their desires, territories, and resources (both human and natural)*. Distinctive institutional and symbolic media forms may emerge in response to a set of imperatives constructed in changing markets in order to govern the habits, fears, and passions of dispersed populations that differ from another territorial setting. In general, Western media policy practices can be seen as part of post-capitalist governmentality that leans towards an image of flexible political reason that aims for adaptation. The new situation apparently calls for different thinking, theories, and openings in order to understand the 'capitalization' of cultural systems like journalism and how multiple spatio-temporal, country-specific constraints modifies systems in globalising contexts.

We have to understand that the *dead ground* formed by different cultural and economic topographies rejects the Western political and epistemological dominance over the world. Devices of 'normal' science informing conscious media policy still cherish the idea of holding the high ground and the ability to base knowledge on inter-visibility between the observer and reality, narrative or ideology. This notion, however, requires revision. The best way to initiate this revision is to turn the gaze inwards, and open up the Western 'capitalised' morality based on hubris and vested interest in a one-sided trade-off. We should remember *Anaïs Nin's* notion: *'We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are.'* Our reality of the world is not the final reality but just one competing cultural and economic form.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) News Transcript http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636 (accessed 5 June 2008).
2. This chapter is based on the research project 'Beyond East and West: Media Geographies of New Europe' (funded by the Academy of Finland 2007-2009).

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