

Nathan Breneman

Kenton, Ohio

Geography, Regional Studies, and Globalization Theory

Thesis Advisor: Chris Coggins

Mind as Space: Self and Community

Conceptions of self, soul, and/or ego vary widely across cultures and religions. The Chinese pre-Buddhist self belongs more to the world, inside a broad cosmology, of which humans are only a small part. Buddhism holds that the conflation of the ego and the self is an illusion and a source of discontent. Modern Western conceptions of self largely see it as existing as an independent and dominant force in social relations and subjective experience. Each of these different views impacts how a group of people, a culture, or a society interacting within and among both their human communities and their broader environments (which may or may not be viewed as separate). I wish to examine several examples of this in a geographical light and consider how something as fundamental as concepts of selfhood influence our views of politics and our ontological notions, and how Buddhism holds that people can control and shape the illusory experience of self and thus change the very foundations of the relationship between self and other. In stark contrast to Buddhist idealism, Marxist materialist conceptions offer an interesting comparison because of its idea of species-being, the sense that the makeup of human nature is not permanent but dependent on the specific material circumstances at hand, even if it is shapeable to a certain extent.

Section 1: The Self

In this section, I want to explore the origins of the Western self, attempting to give a brief genealogy of its development throughout Western philosophy, and contrast it with the Marxist notion of species-being. Here I hope to show the vivid differences in a sense of community among the two; whereas one is extremely individualistic, the other speaks more to the self's malleability and connection to other selves and prevailing material circumstances. I will suggest the Marxist notion is also comparable to the pre-Buddhist Chinese cosmology, using sources such as the Book of Songs, in the sense that both have broader senses of the place of humans in a material world. Similarly, Buddhism also defines notions for giving, generosity, compassion, and, historically as well as philosophically, promotes equality, which has often come through in a certain degree of gender equality and elimination of class (specifically caste). Throughout the thesis I also plan to incorporate Buddhist Sutras and Shastras where appropriate, such as the Abhidharma, Mahavairocana, and Lotus Sutras.

Section 2: The Community

Raymond Williams' Key Words entry on community will provide a starting point for the section. I will demonstrate how senses of selfhood influence communities by examining Buddhist monastic settings, both lay communities and Sanghas; I will also draw on my own life in America; as well I will look at Marxist conceptions of society, especially David Harvey's Spaces of Hope. Much of this section will be in parsing out what these communities are and how certain shared principles and ideas of self have formed the communities' rituals, practices, notions of property, and, to a certain extent, political struggle. For all of this, The Reader on Cultural Geography will also serve to inform my studies.

Section 3: The Mind as a Space

Consciousness can realistically be thought of as a navigable and transient space, wherein one can shape their mind, and, in my experience, have direct intuitive realizations that supersede intellectual knowledge. This section will suggest alternate explanations for the anathema of essentialization, propose a new cosmopolitanism, deconstruct barriers in politics, and rethink the place of violence. Though I am not stating that all people should become practicing Buddhists, I am stating that a Buddhist is a geographer of the mind and eventually of the consciousness, and this is a geography that has not yet been fully mapped by social theorists. It offers interesting, tangible, and legitimate intersections of epistemological and ontological questions of space and place from a religious approach that has not yet been explored in any detail.