

## Central Places

A central place is any location that offers a service or a product to its surrounding market region. That location might be New York City with its myriad of businesses and business types and that serve the United States and even the world, or it might be Stratton in North Cornwall with its three pubs, a butcher, a corner store, and a newsagent and that serve only the villagers themselves, and not even all of them. The task of central place theory is to delineate the geographical relationship among different central places, that is, to recognise a patterned ground.

It was in Mr Westlake's A-level geography class at St Austell Sixth Form College in Cornwall that I first saw the pattern. Mr Westlake was not much of a teacher, rarely holding our attention, and his presentation of the theory part of central place theory left little residue. It was only when he distributed Cornwall county maps with pieces of tracing paper so that we could plot the distribution of different sized towns (central places), and later join up the dots, that I began to see the point (literally). Amazingly, a spatial pattern emerged. Larger towns like St. Austell, coloured post-box red on my tracing paper, were geometrically encircled by the small forest-green dots of surrounding villages like Sticker, St. Dennis, and my own one of Par. I was stunned that I could see order within the chaos of a Cornish county map. It seemed like black magic. Also, I was stunned that a theory we learnt at school could apply to where I lived. Par was simply home. How could it be a theory?

That tension in central place theory between, on the one hand, a compelling geometry, and, on the other, a compelling lived experience, is also found in the lives and works of the theory's modern founders, two Germans, Walter Christaller (1893–1969) and August Lösch (1906-1945). On the surface, central place theory is about finding an abstract spatial order, and represented for Christaller and Lösch by the geometry of a hexagonal lattice. Patterned ground means for them the geometrical purity of a regular polygon. The trouble, though, is that polygons are not pure. The messy details of geography and history, of life itself, of lived experience, intrude. Not just pattern is important. So is the ground on which it is inscribed, and which muddies an otherwise spotless spatiality.

Christaller, the geographer, finds pure geometrical order early on. He says, "I have always liked drawing.... When I was twelve, I was given the Debes atlas. I came to see the hexagons through my drawing – only the lines were not always straight. But then on small-scale maps they always were!" His doctoral dissertation published in 1933, Central places in Southern Germany, was a continuation of his childhood obsession with drawing lines and making hexagons. In March of that same year, though, Hitler became Chancellor. Pursuing Lebensraum, Hitler sought to expand dramatically Germany's territory, first through annexation, and later by Blitzkrieg military tactics. In planning their new territories, Christaller's central place model provided exactly the geographical template that the Nazis sought. They wanted both industrialization, and a return to a Teutonic rural ideal, and Christaller's hexagonal scheme linking rural villages with industrial cities provided precisely for this possibility. From 1940 Christaller was employed by Konrad Meyer who headed the Planning and Soil Office, and which was part of the Reich's Commission for the Strengthening of Germanism operated by the SS under Heinrich Himmler. The task was to draw up plans for reconfiguring the geography of Germany's eastern conquests ("General plan of the East"), primarily Czechoslovakia and Poland, and if successful, Russia

itself. Christaller was given special charge of planning Poland using central place theory (Figure 1). As Christaller said, "Because of the destruction of the Polish state and the integration of its western parts into the German Empire, everything is again fluid. ... Our task will be to create in a short time all the spatial units, large and small, that normally develop slowly by themselves ... so that they will be functioning as vital parts of the German Empire as soon as possible." The central place pattern Christaller envisioned for Poland was clearly soiled by the ground on which it was enacted. To create the new hexagonal landscape, 4.5 million out of the 10.2 million Poles living in the country were removed through relocation, deportation, and extermination.

The other founder of central place theory, the economist August Lösch, was far less sympathetic to Hitler, and unlike Christaller never swore an oath of allegiance to him. In 1933 after Hitler took power Lösch complained in his diary that, "everybody dances now to the whistle of that one fool. In this Germany, only creatures are still tolerated. But I am hoping and working for that Germany which will come thereafter." That said, like Christaller, Lösch hankered after pure pattern, and which again he thought was best represented by the nested hexagons of central places. That pattern did not necessarily already lie on the ground, though, but was as much as anything a rational ideal and moral benchmark for which to strive. As he famously wrote in his book, The Economics of Location, "The real duty of the economist is not to explain our sorry reality, but to improve it. The question of the best location is far more dignified than determination of the actual one" (Lösch 1954, page 4). While Lösch's pattern was never as grounded empirically as Christaller's, nonetheless it was informed by Lösch's historical and geographical context. For Lösch, Germany's hope in the face of "that one fool," and the tumultuous period preceding his ascendancy, lay in upholding the purity of reason. Reason represented the moral alternative to the "contemptible" and "destructive" "chaos" that otherwise reigned (Lösch 1954, page 364). Central place theory was so important to Lösch because it derived from, and was the crystallization of, reason. In this sense, central place theory made as much a moral claim as it did a geographical and economic one. Lösch died shortly after the war from privations suffered by upholding this moral claim about pattern against the grounded chaos that surrounded him.

It is easy to be bamboozled when seeing spatial patterns, and to think their symmetry possesses inherent meaning. Certainly, I thought that the central place hexagons of Cornwall whispered secrets as I plotted them as a sixth former. Had I been paying attention to Mr Westlake, however, I would have recognised that in addition to the pattern, there is a need to recognise the ground in which they are embedded and gain significance. It is not only patterned ground that is important but also a grounded pattern.

## REFERENCES

1. W. Christaller, Central Places in Southern Germany, trans. C. W. Baskin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1967). First published in 1933.
2. A. Lösch, The Economics of Location, 2nd edn., trans W. H. Woglom with the assistance of W. F. Stolper (New Haven, CT, 1954). First published in 1940.