Ebola Virus Disease: Space, Place, and Power Essay

Space, place, and power are fundamentally linked to the unfair distribution of privilege and protection in human geography, specifically in the networked spread of Ebola throughout Africa. Power, though the privilege of where a person is born, ensures safety, but the lack of this power makes someone susceptible to such diseases, because of where they were born. This thesis can be examined through distinctions between space and place, networks of disease, 1st world luxuries, cultural differences and differences between human and physical geography.

First world countries and third world countries are all just spaces, but the distinction between these spaces are the places that they have become, and attributes to why people do not have access to proper hygiene and are vulnerable to disease because they were born in a specific space. Space does not hold any inherent meaning and is somewhat metaphysical, but places are spaces that have been given meaning, and how that space affects people and is affected by people. Power on the other hand is more complex, as:

Sociologists sometimes identify power with wealth and status, and military analysts sometimes measure it in terms of military forces and weaponry. But as the United States discovered in Vietnam and Iraq, having the means of power is not the same as being powerful, (Lukes 2007, 59).

Whereas, in different contexts, power is aligned with people able to bring about change, in the context of this essay, power will be attributed to the economic and social power of the first worlds, when compared to the lack of power held by the developing countries such as Africa.

According to NSW Health, the Ebola virus disease is an illness with a fatality rate of 25% up to 90%, making it one of the world's most virulent. It is transmitted through contact with blood, body fluids, and tissues, from either infected people or animals, (NSW health). Contact and transmission largely happens due to hunting infected animals, or handling infected dead. In the largest outbreak of the virus, West Africans were the most dramatically affected by the disease, the outbreak lasting from 2014-2016 with 28,646 cases and 11,323 deaths (World Health Organisation). In regard to space, place, and power, _____ Allen makes the point that "geography makes a difference to the exercise of power" (Allen 2003, p.1). This is made evident in the fact that nowhere near the amount of people that died during this outbreak would have died if the outbreak took place in a first world country, where people are situated geographically dramatically affects how they can exercise power, or how power can be exercised over them. This is because "power is inherently spatial and, conversely, spatiality is imbued with power" (Allen 2003, p.3). The meaning that people have endowed space with makes the difference between who has access to proper hygiene, medical attention, and important services, and who isn't.

The first world and third world are both spaces occupied with people, but because of the places they have been transformed into, people that have equal worth do not have equal access to certain technologies and privileges, which makes them vulnerable to diseases such as Ebola. While in the first world, even the slightest contact with Ebola results in immediate nation-wide coverage, quarantine, and world class medical attention. The third world is not afforded such

luxuries from having this power, because of their place, and the powers and values attributed to these spaces, some people are protected and have access to medicine and hygiene. Tuan states that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it and endow it with value” (1977, p.6). These different ways that spaces are imagined and experienced creates a divide from ‘us’ and ‘them,’ these narratives and belonging is the difference between life and death for many.

Due to the most severe of the outbreak being situated in West Africa, a global media narrative was created which made Ebola synonymous with Africa. This disease’s threat became linked with place, and to many, spurred colonial constructions that anyone that looked even vaguely African could be a carrier for the disease, even in first world countries where the disease had not even touched (The Verge). The threat spatialised to West Africa and simplified to the first world that it was a place to be feared, toxic, and off limits. This narrative was furthered by discourse surrounding spread of infections, specifically from the consumption of bushmeat, which is a cultural practice, and also was made to be seen as uncivilised when compared to Western game meat. This is an example prejudice systemic of the colonial-era surrounding foreign customs. Through how Africans were treated as if they are harbouring the disease covertly, it furthers the notion mentioned earlier through how ideas of place reinforces an “us” and a “them.”

There are other factors at play that is responsible for the networked spread of Ebola, for instance cultural differences. Negative feelings towards colonials complicates medical treatment from outside forces. Along with cultural customs of traditional burials causing high risks of transmission due to the handling of possibly infected dead bodies. Along with this, rather than being treated in hospitals, many are cares for by relatives or healthcare workers, often in resource poor settings that are inadequate to control or contain the infection. Being unable to test the food which is hunted also complicates the “bush meat” which they eat, because there is no way of knowing if it is infected or not, complicated further because there is no vaccine for Ebola. Developing countries do not have the widespread access to electricity which we do in the first world, this is one of the largest concerns with the spread of Ebola, as the majority of medicines require to be kept at certain temperatures, which are unattainable without electrically powered cooling units. Due to these places not being culturally advanced, they do not have access to such medicines, and have their overall quality of life and level of health reduced. In this contemporary world, we have advanced so far with technology, but there are many places that do not have access to bare essentials, because of how place is distinguished, and unbalances the distribution of power.

An article by the Washington Post placed blame on the spread of Ebola onto budget cuts to public health and to the World Health Organisation. This demonstrates the seemingly unrelated consequences of power within networks, when something abstract like economic power is lacking in a certain area, there are very physical consequences such as outbreaks of deadly diseases, that cannot be immediately and effectively controlled. As Foucault theorised, “power is a networked space of relations– and it can also be a necessary, productive and positive force in the networks of society,” (Gaventa, 2003, p. 2) it can also be a devastating and negative force with unknown consequences. Due to regions in West Africa being unable to attain fuel for ambulances and protective gear to repel contamination, and because of the budget cuts of WHO (World Health Organisation) left people ill-equipped to contain the outbreak, resulting in many deaths. WHO’s budget has been reduced by 12% (Washington Post), in the two years before this outbreak of Ebola, leaving the budget still at close to $4 billion, these cuts being in

aspects which made combating the Ebola outbreak much more difficult. The severity of these cuts is made most evident when WHO declined helping fund the medical attention of a Sierra Leone doctor, who had been treating those infected with Ebola and become infected herself, resulting in the doctor's death (Washington Post). The National Institutes of Health Director Dr. Francis Collins stated that he believed the entire Ebola crisis "could have been avoided altogether," (McCoy), if not for the agency's budget cuts, as they had been working on Ebola vaccines from 2001 onwards that he believes would have been ready if it was not for the stagnated funding.

In conclusion—space, place, and power due to how unfair privilege and protection is distributed, due to human geography, is responsible for the networked spread of Ebola throughout Africa, which killed thousands. The privilege of being born in a difference space has ensured safety, but those lacking such privilege are made susceptible to such diseases, and those who hold power making poor economic decisions which result in many further deaths. Distinctions between space and place, networks of disease, first world luxuries, cultures differences, and the distinctions between human and physical geography are what has spelled the difference between those who are marked for death at the hands of contagions such as Ebola, and those who are not.

Go through past sources, it is possible I have not reached word count with the extended quote.