

# The postmodern challenge: reconstructing human geography

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue in favour of regarding human geography as part of the social theory movement. By confronting the intellectual disarray in human geography, and addressing the challenge of postmodernism and deconstruction, the discipline could attain a pivotal role in the social sciences and humanities.

KEY WORDS: Human geography, Social theory, Philosophy, Postmodernism, Deconstruction

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a time of intellectual crisis. It is also a moment of remarkable opportunity. Within the social sciences and humanities, there is presently a tremendous furor over philosophy and method, amounting (in many cases) to a collapse of identity. The clamour of these debates has barely percolated through to geography, which is preoccupied with its own identity crisis, and particularly with making sense of the discipline's internal disarray. In this paper, I argue that both sets of problems can be alleviated if they are consolidated into one. The social theory movement in human geography has now attained sufficient internal coherence and maturity as to warrant serious appraisal.<sup>1</sup> I hope to show that a realignment of geography with social theory would have a triple effect of: (a) repositioning geography to a pivotal role in the social sciences and humanities; (b) recasting the internal structure of the discipline; and (c) reforging geography's links with the mainstream debates in the philosophy and method of the human sciences.

In order to address this ambitious agenda, I first review the current state of human geography, and argue that the topical diversity which some people perceive as a strength of the subject is, in fact, a reflection of acute intellectual obsolescence. Secondly, I examine some current debates in social theory which, in abbreviated terms, may be referred to as the 'postmodern challenge' facing geographers. Thirdly, in the heart of this essay, I explore the impact

of contemporary social theory on the structure of human geography. Finally, some of the profound implications of my argument are introduced.

Some words of warning are necessary before I begin. Given the broad scope of this paper, it will be obvious that I shall have to take certain liberties in my presentation. For example, I have deliberately omitted a direct consideration of physical geography. Furthermore, my guide to sources and references will be indicative instead of comprehensive, and (in many instances) complex issues and arguments will be simplified in order to facilitate progress. I hope that these limitations will be excused by readers sympathetic to the essay's underlying purpose, which is to invite the most general of debates on this topic.

## THE STATE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

### *A report on geographical knowledge*

There are few who would dispute the claim that contemporary human geography is a maze of diverse interests. The current structure of specialty groups in the Association of American Geographers (AAG) is presumably a reasonable self-expression of members' interests (Table 1). Of the 37 groups identified in September 1986, 6 focus on specific world regions, 5 focus on population issues (including ageing, women, and native Americans), 5 focus on economic geography (including agriculture, energy, industry, and transportation), 5 focus on a loose assemblage of

TABLE I. Association of American Geographers specialty groups (as of September 1986)

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Africa
Ageing
Applied
Asian
Bible
Biogeography
Canadian
Cartography
China
Climate
Coastal and marine
Contemporary agriculture & land use
Cultural ecology
Energy
Environmental perception
Geographic information systems
Geographic perspectives on women
Geography in higher education
Geomorphology
Historical
Industrial
Latin America
Mathematical models and quantitative methods
Medical
Microcomputers
Native Americans
Political
Population
Recreation, tourism & sport
Regional development & planning
Remote sensing
Rural development
Socialist geography
Soviet & East European
Transportation
Urban
Water resources

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techniques-oriented interests (including remote sensing, microcomputers, cartography, and mathematical/quantitative approaches), and 5 focus on physical geography.

The remainder of the list includes such conventional categories as historical, political and medical geography, as well as the less expected, such as the 'bible' group. It is difficult to identify any ready intellectual coherence in this list. It contains no specific reference to the theory, philosophy or method of geography. There is nothing called 'social' geography, which I might expect to exist alongside economic and political geography.

In contrast to member-determined study groups, the AAG itself identifies 57 'topical proficiencies'. When renewing their memberships, individuals are asked to identify up to three proficiencies. For the

moment, the exact distribution of membership affiliations is not so important as the 'official' view of the structure of geography implied by the AAG's list of choices (Table II). The first thing to notice is the extreme eclecticism of the Association's view of geography. It endorses proficiencies in librarianship as well as audio-visual techniques. But there is apparently no need for proficiency in theoretical matters, philosophy or method as they relate to geography. These are presumably of less import than military geography *inter alia*.

Some might consider these taxonomies as irrelevant, or even as obsolete objects of derision. But they are vitally important for two reasons: first, they represent the sanctioned views of the structure of contemporary American geography; and second, by legitimating certain categories of inquiry, they can tend to confine discourse to those categories. For anyone who cares to listen, the message being transmitted by these taxonomies is that contemporary geography is an eclectic mish-mash of old and new, pertinent and irrelevant, the quirky and incomplete.

One should not, of course, expect to learn the full intentions of a discipline from such simplified summaries of bureaucratic organization. Individual practitioners in any subfield may be expected to adopt an affiliation, but then to select their own meaning and agenda within their chosen appellation. However, we can only speculate about these hidden aspects of practice. The fact remains that practitioners themselves, plus their parent organization, have defined a very particular order of geographical knowledge. In my view, it is patently obsolete and incomplete. None of the many recent essays redefining the field of geography has done anything to allay my sense of incoherence and lack of direction in the discipline.<sup>2</sup> Geography, perhaps more than most disciplines, seems to have had incredible difficulty in defining its central analytical objects, its core theoretical issues, and its significant research puzzles. The only common ground which presently unites some groups of geographers is a predilection toward positivism to the exclusion of all other approaches. There is also a burgeoning camaraderie amongst those who envisage the salvation of geography through a return to the 'basics'.

How did we allow our discipline to attain such a depressing disarray?

#### *The origins of intellectual crisis*

Geography has always had a 'soft' centre. Since its introduction into the university curriculum in the

TABLE II. AAG topical proficiencies (1986)

Topic	Number of members*
01 Administration	122
02 Agricultural geography	257
03 Economic development	331
04 Applied geography	315
05 Arid regions geography	94
06 Biogeography	237
07 Climatology	374
08 Coastal geography	98
09 Environmental studies (conservation)	593
10 Cultural geography	757
11 Economic geography	622
12 Educational geography	149
13 Location theory	160
14 Geomorphology	441
15 Historical geography	585
16 History of geography	119
17 Marine resources	49
19 Manufacturing geography	110
20 Marketing geography	132
21 Medical geography	136
23 Military geography	104
24 Natural hazards	81
25 Oceanography	40
27 Physical geography	690
28 Planning, regional	386
29 Planning, urban	396
31 Political geography	392
32 Population geography	349
33 Recreational geography	159
34 Regional geography	306
35 Resource geography	264
36 Rural geography	156
37 Soils geography	106
38 Transportation & communication	243
39 Tropical geography	106
40 Urban geography	922
41 Water resources	310
42 Field methods	68
43 Land use	337
44 Quantitative methods	389
46 Teaching techniques	98
47 Audio-visual materials & techniques	46
48 Remote sensing	511
49 Social geography	277
50 Energy	83
51 Geographic information systems	252
52 Cartography general	766
55 Librarianship, geographical	67
56 Electronic data processing	172
57 Environmental perception	223
AAG membership	5686

Note: \*the number of members claiming this topical proficiency on their membership application forms. Each member may designate up to three proficiencies

Source: AAG Newsletter, January 1987, p. 35

nineteenth century, its division into human and physical geography reflected the wider split between social and natural sciences. However, in human geography at least, I believe that the ultimately more important historical factor has been the progressive *disengagement* of the discipline from the mainstream of philosophy, social science and the humanities. The last time that geography was truly integrated with this mainstream was during the nineteenth-century era of scientific discovery and exploration. Since then, its concerns have become increasingly 'exceptional'.

A highly specific and important fulcrum in the twentieth-century evolution of geography was the 'quantitative revolution'. Apart from its intrinsic (de)merits, it had the effect of returning geographers to one element of the mainstream debate in social science, since most other disciplines had experienced (or were experiencing) similar progressions. The early tentative reunification which was made possible through the efforts of quantitative geographers was followed by a remarkable efflorescence in human geographical theory and method. For example, Marx was rediscovered as part of a wider examination of social theory in general; behavioural and humanistic geographies were defined; and many existing schools of thought felt obliged to sharpen their rationales. Of course, there were also negative aspects to the revitalization trend, such as the attempt by some to deny the validity of a specifically spatial approach to social structures.

The renaissance of human geography, through its reconciliation with the social science mainstream, has engendered new problems. At one level, it is very difficult and time-consuming simply to keep abreast of current debates. In addition, as more and more non-geographers write on geographical topics, the ambivalence surrounding the geographical identity is aggravated. At another more fundamental level, however, is the problem of discriminating amongst the various intellectual claims on our attention. It is human nature to focus attention on those things which interest us most. Discourse outside our own subdiscipline(s) is usually totally ignored and, hence, our ability to engage these fields is severely compromised. Recent well-intentioned pleas for tolerance of competing academic approaches in fact only exacerbate the confusion. Anything goes! What passes now as a 'discourse on geography' is little more than a cacophony of competing claims on behalf of the separate subdisciplines. The gist of the claim is usually the same: *my* theory is better than yours. Such opinions are frequently voiced by scholars working

on different problems, or varying objects of inquiry, often with analytical goals which are totally divergent from those whom they criticize. Hence, when a Marxist challenges a positivist to make judgements on diverse theories of society and the latter's sole concern is mapping the local pattern of electoral votes, they are addressing different problems and using different languages; something more will be needed to enable the pair to converse.

The present structure of human geography is cause for optimism and deep pessimism. The optimism derives from the extent to which discourse in human geography has advanced during the decades since the quantitative revolution. The pessimism has its roots in the present 'contest of faculties' which characterizes geography.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be no consensus on what human geography is, or what are its objectives in analysis. There is even less awareness of the need for comparative analysis of the babel of subdisciplinary languages current in geography.

As an inevitable concomitant of increasing disciplinary diversity, geographers have turned for academic reward and legitimacy outwards from geography. As researchers have sought recognition in adjacent disciplines, closest to their special interests, they have often been forgotten by their home discipline. Thus slighted, many 'rising stars' have become 'embittered elders'. The centrifugal tendency which drives geographers from their home realm is given added impetus by the proliferation of subdisciplinary specialty groups and new journals. The net consequence of extreme specialization and external reward is that the loudest noise in contemporary human geography is the bustle of divergent geographers departing their discipline.

Counter-balancing these centrifugal forces is a recently-developed siege mentality in geography. The discipline is manifestly under attack, and the response has been to rally to protect the 'turf'. Geography, like many other disciplines, is being questioned for its 'relevance'. And, as the academic community as a whole scurries to legitimize its existence, certain disciplines appear to care less about the whole and more about their own ascendance. In such a climate of 'disciplinary Darwinism', paradoxical results can coexist: some advocates make excessive, vociferous claims on behalf of geography; others sink into a trough of despair and quietude.

*The simultaneity of the divergent and convergent trends within geography has produced a peculiar crisis. Specifically, defensive wagons have been drawn up to protect a disciplinary core which may have already evaporated. In*

such disarray, it is no surprise that the discipline falters, and the need to break the impasse becomes urgent. . . .

## POSTMODERNISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

A mix-in, for those who have not yet followed aerobic eating into its postmodern era, may be butterscotch chips and walnuts, pulverized Reese's peanut butter cups, crushed Oreos, M&Ms or—in some temples of asceticism—granola. (Notice on carton of Steve's Ice Cream)

### *Postmodernism*

Very few people have a clear sense of what 'postmodernism' means. To some, it appears as the latest in a long line of architectural fads; to others, as a new kind of literature. And, as with the appearance of all new fashions, there have been subsequent stampedes to dismiss the new fad by defenders of existing fashions. However, in its purest form, postmodernism represents a quite fundamental attack on contemporary philosophy.

Postmodernism is basically a revolt against the rationality of modernism.<sup>4</sup> It is, in the specific context of this paper, a deliberate attack on the modernist epistemology.<sup>5</sup> This epistemology is 'foundational' in character; it searches for universal truth and meaning, usually through some kind of metadiscourse or metanarrative. Postmodernism is, in Lyotard's words, frankly 'incredulous toward metanarratives'.<sup>6</sup> It holds out for a philosophic culture freed from the search for ultimate foundations or the final justification. Such a philosophy would be a 'conversation' from which no-one is excluded and no-one holds a privileged position. The philosopher's sole purpose would be to keep the conversation going. In practice, postmodernism has taken the form of a revolt against the too-rigid conventions of existing method and language. It has attacked the intellectual conditions which allow for and tolerate the dominance of one discourse over another. It has, therefore, worked against the potentially repressive power of theoretical metalanguages which can act to marginalize a nonconforming discourse.

Postmodern philosophy has been powered by a simple but penetrating question: 'On what basis can a claim be made for a privileged status of one theoretical viewpoint over another?' The essence of the postmodern answer is that all such claims are ultimately

*undecidable*. The impact of this response has been immense. Its original force was experienced in linguistics and literary criticism, where the question turned on the respective authorities of author, text and reader. From there the question has spread to other text-oriented disciplines, especially philosophy, law and architecture.<sup>7</sup> The *central issue* in all these debates is *authority*; i.e., on what basis is the privileged position being claimed? The *central focus* in these debates is on how *language* is used to maintain the hegemony of the privileged discourse, and on how it may be reclaimed to permit an open dialogue.

The effects of a postmodern discourse are profoundly destabilizing and potentially anarchic. Why? Well, because all prior paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and discourses thereby lose their privileged status. They are, in principle at least, all equally important (or unimportant). Moreover, there is no clear consensus on the criteria by which any claim to privilege will be judged; and, importantly, most postmodernists hold that *all attempts to forge such a consensus should be resisted*, since its effect will ultimately be to establish the hegemony of some new metanarrative.

Postmodern philosophy has risen to recent prominence because of what has been called the 'linguistic turn'. This refers to the realization/belief that language lies at the heart of all knowledge. Our conceptual orderings, it is claimed, do not exist in the nature of things, but instead reflect our philosophical systems. These, in turn, contain conscious and unconscious strategies of exclusion and repression, and are rife with internal contradictions and suppressed paradoxes. The task of *deconstruction* is to expose these contradictions and paradoxes.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Deconstruction*

Deconstruction shows how language imposes limits on our thinking. The stress on what has been spoken or written becomes only as important as what is hidden or unsayable (i.e., beyond the conventions of language).<sup>9</sup> According to Derrida, this kind of paradox can never be entirely avoided. We are never complete masters of the language we use; its effects will always go beyond what we can control. Hence, we inevitably fail in the exercise of representation, and the task of deciding between various interpretations is rendered impossible by the essential undecidability of textual meaning. Since *no* textual system can be complete and fully self-validating, deconstruction focuses on showing us how to 'read for absences' in the text, particularly the way in which archetypes of linguistic

convention can lull us into a false sense of security about the 'truth' of a text.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, postmodernism and deconstruction represent a profound intellectual challenge. Irrespective of how one feels about these trends, it must be recognized that their effects *have already been felt* in most disciplines. These impacted disciplines now face the task of making sense of the postmodernism-induced 'anarchy'. There is no simple method for achieving the task of 'reconstruction'. The postmodernists, as we have seen, insist on rejecting the construction of new metanarratives. They have been accused of promoting the end of philosophy because they have transformed the discipline into an infinitude of incommensurable language games—an extended sequence of conversations.

Others have attempted to recover rationality in discourse. They have argued not for the traditions in modernism or the enlightenment, but for a transformation in philosophy. Most of these accounts have conceded the relativism implicit in language, and have sought a new basis for rationality. One of the major sources of reconstructionist thought has been in hermeneutics, which is a theory of understanding and interpretation. Hermeneutics reflects on the conditions of knowing, understanding, and speaking; its advocates claim it can lead to a deeper self-understanding which has moral and practical implications. This is achieved via a continuing reassessment of conflicting interpretations (reflecting partial understanding) of ourselves and the world, within the 'hermeneutic circle'.

It may be revealing to note that the roots of deconstruction are to be found in hermeneutics. However, whereas deconstruction disavows any subsequent reconstruction, hermeneutics insists upon it as a way to recover the truth and unity of the text under consideration. In a sense, hermeneuticists are the true inheritors of the modernist search for rationality. They seek not for the end of philosophy, but for its transformation. The possibility of mutual understanding through a general reconstruction is at the core of the hermeneutic enterprise. It presumes the existence of a community of understanding—a linguistic/interpretive community—within which communication is possible.

In summary, the pursuit of epistemological rationality favoured in the modernist project has been dealt a mortal blow by the linguistic turn in philosophy. Once the door opened even slightly to intellectual relativism, it was impossible to close. The central lesson of hermeneutics—that interpretation is an

unavoidable dimension of understanding—has been almost universally conceded. But no-one currently seems to know how to halt the slide into the anarchy of deconstruction without retreating to the strictures of modernism.

#### *A way ahead?*

At present, there is very little consensus on how to proceed beyond the dilemmas of postmodernism. However, in order to explain how these problems challenge and inform geography, I must make some assumptions which carry us deep into the thickets of the postmodern debate. In so doing, I should emphasize that I am not foreclosing on any aspect of this debate. It is simply that, in order to give full expression to my explication, I am obliged to take some provisional positions in many key dilemmas.

In the first place, I am happy to embrace the central proposition of postmodernism. I reject the intellectual hegemony implied by the modernist project; there can be no 'grand theory' for human geography! On the other hand, I am unhappy with the extremes of deconstructionist relativism; theories are not all of equal importance, and I shall want to make statements about their comparative qualities. To reject a single hegemonic discourse, and yet seek to claim a privileged status for some theories over others, may appear to be a paradoxical stance. But it is reasonable if we are willing to distinguish between epistemology and ontology. Let me elaborate on this.

I have already explained that postmodernism arose as a reaction to modernist epistemology. The modernist search for a unified theory of society and social knowledge ultimately created a menagerie of internally-consistent yet mutually-exclusive conversations in social theory. Each approach (including Marxism and positivism, for example) constituted a separate epistemology—a theory of knowledge rooted in its own explanation of the order of things. Dialogue between these diverse modernist epistemologies was rare. Under the guise of tolerance, a comfortable pluralism was eventually established. Postmodernism destroyed all that. It undercut the illusion of epistemological independence; it forced a dialogue between competitors by questioning the basis for their varying 'truth claims'. In other words, postmodernism challenged the *ontological* bases of the separate epistemologies. The charge of postmodernism is, in essence, to overcome epistemology. This means exposing the confines imposed by the way we construct knowledge, as well as the hidden

ontological assumptions implicit in our theoretical statements.

There is no more important task for contemporary human geography than to confront the ontological and epistemological challenges posed by the postmodern movement. Most of our current dialogue in geography pales to insignificance by comparison. Moreover, if we choose to ignore this challenge, then outsiders will be justified in labelling geography as moribund and irrelevant. In the remainder of this essay, I shall take up this challenge, and outline a postmodern reconstruction of human geography.<sup>11</sup>

### RECONSTRUCTING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

In these next two sections of the paper, I attempt to link my critique of the structure of contemporary geography to the central concerns of postmodernism. I shall recast the concerns of human geography within the context of mainstream social theory, and thereby demonstrate (1) geography's pivotal role in a reconstitution of the human sciences; (2) a plausible restructuring of the internal order of the discipline; and (3) the insight and advancement made possible through embracing the postmodern challenge. In order to achieve this, I shall first set out some elementary precepts to do with the nature of social theory, its method, and the object of geographical analysis.

#### *Theory*

Social theory is concerned with the illumination of the concrete process of everyday life.<sup>12</sup> Human geography, therefore, can be construed as that part of social theory which focuses on the spatial patterns and processes which underlie the structures and appearances of everyday life. The primary concern in social theory, during the past decade at least, has been the structure and evolution of society over time and space. A common problem in almost all social sciences has been to explain how human behaviour is constituted through space and time. This has affected disciplines as ostensibly separated as anthropology and economics, psychology and sociology. The focus on time and space places a new prominence on history and geography—the two disciplines with special claims to time and space. Unfortunately, few in geography have yet appreciated the enormous consequences of the convergence of time-space analysis in our cognate disciplines. *It promises to resituate geography at the very centre of a newly defined paradigm of human inquiry.* This is, I realize, an enormous claim. But I think I can justify it.

Human behaviours are enabled and constrained by a complex set of social, economic and political processes which act through time and space. How can we begin to explain this complexity? Assume that time and space define the two dimensions of a fabric upon which are inscribed the processes and patterns of human existence. At issue is exactly how we conceptualize the processes of human life on this tapestry.

Social theory provides a large number of potential explanations. For instance, Marx and Weber provided the foundations for two of the more popular bases for social inquiry. Marxian theory has tended to emphasize the broader structural conditions of social life. In his analysis of capitalist society, Marx chose to focus on the central significance of commodity production for profit as a principle of social organization. The capitalist mode of production gives rise to a fundamental division of society into two classes: capital and labour. These inevitably become involved in class conflict, which is mediated by the capital-controlled state apparatus. Weberian theory, on the other hand, focuses on a much richer concept of class, including not only its economic basis, but other aspects of the social order, including status groups based (for example) on ethnic cohesion. Weber also foresaw the importance of bureaucracy in twentieth-century capitalism, as well as the rise of the nation-state and nationalism. His work is the basis for much contemporary theorizing about the legitimacy of the capitalist state, and the trend toward corporatism in class relations. Aside from these two major figures in social theory, there have, of course, been a variety of alternative theories of society. For instance, 'pluralist' views of society have dominated much of American scholarship, emphasizing the individualistic practices of everyday life, such as voting behaviour.

Each of these theoretical approaches has a particular 'home domain' in which it lays claim to an unusual explanatory power.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Marxist theory has historically been strong in analysis of the structural context of, and economic causality in, human behaviour. Many Weberian studies have placed emphasis on the bureaucratic institutions through which human actions are mediated. And pluralists have demonstrated the significance of individual voluntaristic actions in influencing aggregate social processes.

The existence of a proliferation of social theories is one desirable quality of the postmodern approach. This approach does not aim to resolve the conflicts and contradictions between theories in favour of a single grand theory. Instead, it deliberately maintains the creative tensions between theories, in the belief

that accelerated insight is likely to derive from different interpretations, revealed inconsistencies and relaxed assumptions. But how, in such a relativistic postmodern world, can we begin to discriminate between the different claims made by advocates of conflicting theories?

#### *Method*

To me, the essence of science is *interpretation*. Our understanding of the world alters as we (the observers) change, and as the world itself (the observed) evolves. The world of science is never still; it is, in a phrase, infinitely hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup>

If this is the case, then 'truth' and 'fact' are very elusive things, determined by the evolving states of the observer and the observed. Yes, it is 'true' that I am writing this on paper on a desk; but because I am partly colour-blind, I can never hope to describe to you the precise nature of that writing experience. There are a limited number of inevitably partial ways (linguistic or otherwise) to compare our experiences. Now this may seem a trivial case, but I believe it can be generalized. There are no facts or truths about which there can be a common and permanent consensus; there are only degrees of freedom about an interpretation. Some parts of science are seemingly fortunate because there are relatively few degrees of freedom around their explanations; others are beset by varying degrees of ambiguity. This latter condition besets all the social sciences. It is more properly regarded as the model of 'normal science' than the relatively precise approach of the experimental sciences.

It therefore makes little sense to talk about 'facts', 'truth', the 'correctness' of a theory, or even 'science' itself, without further qualifications. These qualifiers should elucidate the conditions under which the claims being advanced have been constructed. In short (deconstructionists notwithstanding), an advocate *necessarily* has to specify the criteria through which the claim for privileged status is being sought. Such a claim may then be systematically analyzed, and counter-claims advanced. The development of a mode of comparative discourse is, however, probably the most difficult task in modern social theory. How can we systematically compare the diverse theoretical presuppositions of (say) Marx, Weber, and the pluralists? And then go on to persuade each other of the validity of our respective positions? The postmodernist approach is, as I have suggested, to deliberately reject claims of privilege by all epistemological domains. Other approaches continue the search for a

language and linguistic community within which common discourse and mutual understanding (through reconstruction) is feasible. Notice, in this latter case, that the need to establish some 'ground rules' (i.e., assessment criteria) quickly becomes the prerogative for further conversation.<sup>15</sup>

### *Object*

Whether one chooses to revel in a deconstructionist relativism or to pursue a reconstructed rationality, we must be clear about the objects we are analysing, be they firms, households, or whatever. This is important for two reasons. First, comparative statements regarding the power of theory can only make sense when they refer to equivalent analytical objects. Hence, a Weberian and a Marxist who undertake an analysis of class may never be able to make comparative theoretical judgements since they are discussing objects which have *a priori* been defined differently. Secondly, some precision in defining analytical objects is necessary if we are to debate the structure of the discipline. For instance, you and I may have a totally different understanding of what is implied by the term 'medical' geography: one of us might emphasize the role of geography in disease aetiology; the other might only consider the importance of geography in the organization of health care delivery. Under these circumstances, we are likely to appeal to two totally separate conceptual apparatuses to organize our thinking, such as diffusion models versus location-allocation models.

In order to place some boundaries about the discourse on objects of geographical analysis, I have to move further from a postmodernist stance and toward a more limited relativism. Consider once again the time-space tapestry. Contemporary social theory has two themes which are important in understanding how this tapestry evolves: structure and agency; and society and space.<sup>16</sup>

Human landscapes are created by knowledgeable actors (or agents) operating within a specific social context (or structure). The structure-agency relationship is mediated by *inter alia* a series of institutional arrangements which both enable and constrain action. Hence, three 'levels of analysis' can be identified: structures, institutions and agents. 'Structures' include the long-term, deep-seated social practices which govern daily life, such as class, state, family. 'Institutions' represent the phenomenal forms of structures, including (for example) the state apparatus. And 'human agents' refer to the roles and influence of individual human actors in determining

the precise, observable outcomes of any social process.

It is impossible to predict the exact outcome of the interaction between structure and agency because, while individual activities are framed within a particular structural context, they can also transform the context itself. Any narrative about landscape is necessarily an account of the reciprocal relationship between relatively long-term structural forces and the shorter-term routine practices of individual human agents. Economic, political, and social history is therefore time-specific in the sense that these relationships evolve at different temporal rates; it is also place-specific in that these relationships unfold in recognizable 'locales' according to sometimes opaque logic of spatial diffusion.

As society evolves, so does its spatial expression; but, by the same token, the geographical form will have repercussions on the social forces themselves. This reflexive impact of space on society can be achieved in many different ways. In simple terms, social relations are constituted through space (e.g., the organization of production in resource-based activities and environments); constrained by space (such as the inertia imposed by the built environment or the limits imposed by natural hazards); or mediated through space (including the development of ideology and beliefs within geographically-confined regions or locales).

Interaction through space is, of course, complicated by the various scales over which it takes place. Geographical regions, or locales, are defined by physical or human boundaries which delimit fields of process and interaction. In the most general of terminologies, the processes of social life may operate at a macro-, meso-, or micro-scale. We may expect the structure-institution-agency sequence to be replicated (perhaps in different ways) at each scale. So, for instance, national urban structure may be the result of the interaction between global capital and labour relations (e.g., the rise of the Pacific Rim cities); but local neighbourhood structure may also be defined by a capital-labour relation operating in a significantly different way at the community level (e.g., the specific pattern of plant closures).

Any single locale is, therefore, at once a complex synthesis of objects, patterns and processes, derived from the simultaneous evolution of three different levels of social process, and operating at three varying geographical scales. It is as though a multi-tiered sequence of multiply-determined events had been deliberately telescoped into a single dimension; many



levels and scales of process are simply collapsed into a single locale. And over time, the various horizons of each locale accumulate like sediments over the patterns of the past. The locale is, therefore, a complex amalgam of past, present, and newly-forming patterns which coexist in the landscape. This is precisely the intellectual challenge posed by the 'geographical puzzle': to unravel the complex locale into its constituent elements.<sup>17</sup>

*In a most fundamental sense, therefore, the central object in human geography is to understand the simultaneity of time and space in structuring social process. Human geography is the study of the contemporaneity of social process in time and space.*

One very important corollary must be observed. 'Social process' is a phase which carries multiple meanings. In this essay, I shall define it to include the three *primary processes* which structure the time-space fabric. In no particular order of priority, these are: political, economic, and social. They refer respectively to the mechanisms of conflict, production and exchange, and human interaction which characterize every society to some degree. These processes define what I consider to be the pre-eminent sub-disciplines in human geography: *economic geography*, defined as the analysis of the systems of production, exchange and distribution over time and space; *political geography*, defined as the analysis of the systems of class/group conflict over time and space; and *social geography*, defined as the analysis of systems of human interaction over time and space.<sup>18</sup>

The exact manner in which social, political and economic processes become 'operational' in any locale is a matter for empirical determination. In a capitalist society, for example, social, political and economic processes might be translated into the basic structures of class, state and capital. These structures can then be described in terms of their institutional forms (say, social movements, state apparatuses, and fractions of capital), and ultimately, equivalent categories of human agency (such as local trade unions, municipal government, and local chambers of commerce). Different operational forms would be necessary if we considered non-capitalist social formations, either historical or contemporary. So, tribal societies might require appeal to kinship and caste systems to explain social organization. In such a case, economic, political and social processes may become operationalized through 'exchange', 'caste' and 'matriarchal authority' (instead of capital, class, and state).

By defining the 'primary processes' which structure time and space, I have, in effect, taken a step

toward defining some criteria by which my position can be justified. I believe this to be unavoidable if we are to circumvent the absolute relativism implied in deconstruction. The definition of evaluative criteria is still some considerable distance from defining a fully-fledged grand theory (an option which I explicitly reject). I am simply admitting into the conversation a more limited relativism in order to expose the basis for my judgements.

## SOME IMPLICATIONS

The preceding arguments have profound implications, both for the internal structure of the discipline of human geography, and for its relationship with other academic disciplines.

In terms of the discipline's internal structure, the emphasis on the primacy (or centrality) of economic, political and social geographies in explaining the time-space tapestry places other sub-disciplines in less central roles. This does not mean that they are useless or should be abolished; merely that they are less significant in the definition of human geography's intellectual identity. I can be more specific. The other subdisciplines fall into one of three categories: multidimensional, overdetermined, or peripheral.

The majority of human geographical subdisciplines are multidimensional. This is meant to imply that they cut across the three primary processes, necessarily having elements of the social, economic and political contained within them. Hence, 'urban geography' is the study of social, economic and political processes as they occur in cities. 'Cultural geography' will necessarily incorporate all three dimensions in its study of custom and tradition. Methodological inquiries traverse the three categories, although they have no separate substantive identity within human geography. (Hence, the proposal for a 'scientific geography' has no epistemological foundation in my scheme.)

A significant number of subdisciplines are overdetermined, including the apparently crucial topics of historical and regional geography. By overdetermined, I mean that they are empty concepts which convey few (if any) significant analytical distinctions. For instance, the term 'historical geography' is tautological, since all geography is (or should be) time- and place-specific. By convention, historical geography has simply meant a geography which deals with past time periods. A similar redundancy afflicts what is called 'regional geography' which is separable only in that it deals with specifically-defined spatial units; but

all geography, by definition, does precisely that. Beyond their respective time-specific and place-specific boundaries, these two subdisciplines do little more than confirm what geography is about.

Finally, in suggesting that some subdisciplines are less central than others, I mean to imply some priority about the search for geographical knowledge. A provisional privilege for political, social and economic geography has been advanced. It follows that certain subdisciplines are less significant. For instance, the geography of sport is not central to the structure and explanation of geographical knowledge. The case of medical geography is more ambiguous; it may not be central to geography's identity, but it is certainly important to our well-being. Note, however, that this is a different judgement based on social relevance or utility, rather than scholarly centrality.

I cannot complete my analysis of the internal structure of geography in this short paper. The outline presented so far is meant solely as a point of departure, but even this has immediate implications for the sanctioned structure of geography (Tables I and II). For example, the AAG-endorsed list is replete with anachronisms and non-sequiturs, including military geography and librarianship. We may not want to abolish these categories. But if we are interested in reconstructing geography (and I think we should be), then we must discuss the priorities of geographical knowledge. The thrust of my argument so far has been that the current practice of human geography is demonstrably incomplete and obsolete.

This re-evaluation should not stop at the boundaries of the discipline. A great many non-geographers in most other social sciences, humanities, and the professions are now doing geography. They should be welcomed, although they also need to be taught, because what they do is often very poor geography. But, more importantly, *we* need to be selfconscious about the profound reorientation of human knowledge which is implied in the time-space/social theory design. Henceforth, geography must be placed on the same footing as history, as the two disciplines with special claims to the space and time dimensions. Practitioners of politics, sociology and economics must be shown how their partial descriptions of human behaviour require positioning on the time-space fabric in order to make sense of the whole. (The identical charge faces practitioners of all subdisciplines within human geography.) And as a final example, the relationship between geography and planning becomes crystal clear: if geography is intended to describe and explain the structure of society over time and space,

then planning is the attempt to forge new time-space configurations.

The case of history is especially important. The study of history has always found a wide acceptance, partly because of people's intrinsic curiosity, but also because it has been easy to concede the significance of time in human activity. History is everything, because all human life is time-specific; and historians have claimed authority over every conceivable topic which has a chronology. It has been less easy to concede the significance of space. So we should make clear that geography is also everything, because all human life is place-specific. In other words, all social process is contingent upon geography; geography is a condition of social life. This is the only sense in which geography's claim to be a synthetic discipline has any meaning for me. The net consequence of this conceptual reordering is that geography takes on a new prominence and history needs to be rethought.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The fundamental message in this essay has been the need to reconstruct human geography by realigning it with the mainstream of social theory. The revitalization, and perhaps even the survival of the discipline depends upon our willingness to embark upon a constructive engagement with this mainstream.

At the heart of the postmodern challenge to human geography is a deeply-rooted philosophical and methodological issue. It proceeds from the notion that the basis for authority in academic discourse is ultimately undecidable. Postmodernism and deconstruction question the implicit or explicit rationality of all academic discourse; it forces advocates to reconsider and defend anew their positions. This, I have argued, is a highly desirable goal. The postmodern challenge is to face up to the fact of relativism in human knowledge, and to proceed from this position to a better understanding. I have tried, in this essay, to situate geography within this debate.

The reconstruction of human geography proposed in this essay is based on the notion that society is best characterized as a time-space fabric upon which the details of political, social and economic life are inscribed. There are many theoretical approaches available to describe the creation and evolution of this fabric. A postmodern social theory deliberately maintains the creative tensions between all theories in its search for better interpretations of human behaviour. At the core of the wonderful 'geographical

puzzle' lies the dialectic between space and society. Structures, institutions and human agents operate at different scales to define spatial pattern in any given locale. Human geography is the study of contemporaneity in social process over time and space. Within the structure of the discipline, priority (based on the notion of centrality) is accorded to the economic, political and social geography subdisciplines. Other subdisciplines are either multidimensional, overdetermined, or peripheral. This does not mean that they are in any way 'wrong'. But it does suggest the need to recast the form of the discipline, and to shake off its current obsolete and incomplete identity. A reconstructed human geography also has major implications for the other social sciences and humanities. Geography can now claim its place alongside history as one of two key disciplines concerned with the time-space reconstruction of human knowledge.

The reconstitution proposed in this paper inevitably retains the status of a *provisional* account. I have no desire to insist on the rectitude of my particular viewpoint; but I do hope to have made some broader sense of the morass of current topical subdivisions in human geography. Even though I have rejected the search for a new grand theory, it must be clear that I also do not adhere to the 'Anything Goes' school of philosophy. In this essay, I have in fact departed from a pure postmodernist stance, and adopted a more limited relativism. This is a perfectly tenable position. One is not obliged to become a postmodernist in order to accept the challenge of postmodernism. (Moreover, the notion that one has to choose between modernism and postmodernism is itself a highly modernist stance!)

I also hope to have demonstrated the absolute necessity for pursuing this conversation *in context*. No-one is yet sure how the dilemmas of postmodernism/deconstruction/reconstruction will be resolved, but I believe that geography could make a significant contribution to the search for answers. We hold insights into the nature of society as well as into the structure of knowledge. For these insights to be welcomed, however, we must engage in a conversation in context. Most, if not all, of our current difficulties can be traced to our irresponsible and often wilful ignorance of this wider context of discourse in the human and social sciences.<sup>20</sup> I believe that we can gain enormously if we substitute the wider concerns of social theory for the set of internalized, isolated questions which currently consume geographers.

Whether we like it or not, and whether we are aware of it or not, the mainstream debates in social

theory have long swept past us in the direction of postmodernism. In one sense, we are all postmodernist now. I have tried in this essay to catch up to the mainstream. It will obviously take much more time to examine the full implications of my proposals. But human geography is, I believe, in the midst of a major intellectual crisis. It sometimes appears that the discipline will founder. It is singularly ironic that this should surface as a possibility at precisely that time when human geography can legitimately claim centre-stage in academic discourse in the social sciences and humanities. *By realigning itself with the trends in social theory, and by accepting the challenges of postmodernism, a separate identity and meaning for human geography is established, and the discipline takes on a central significance in assembling and interpreting knowledge of our world.* This, at least, is my working hypothesis. I hope that we have the wit and ability to recognize the significance of this opportunity, and the energy to capitalize on its tremendous potential.<sup>21</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Perhaps the best single introduction to the social theory movement in human geography is the collection of essays edited by GREGORY, D. G., URRY, J. (1985) *Social relations and spatial structure* (Macmillan, London)
2. See, for example, the recent essays by ABLER, R. (1987) 'What shall we say? To whom shall we speak?' *Ann. Ass. Am. Geogr.* 77: 511–24; KATES, R. W. (1987) 'The human environment: the road not taken, the road

- still beckoning', *Ann. Ass. Am. Geogr.* 77: 525–34; MORRILL, R. L. (1987) 'A theoretical imperative', *Ann. Ass. of Am. Geogr.* 77: 535–41; and STODDART, D. R. (1987) 'To claim the high ground: geography for the end of the century', *Trans. Inst. Br. Geogr.* 12: 327–36
3. The phrase is due to NORRIS, C. (1985) *Contest of faculties: philosophy and theory after deconstruction* (Methuen, London). It may be pertinent to note that the lists of special interest groups in other countries are just as eclectic as in the US. For instance, the Institute of British Geographers has 17 'study groups'. These are: historical, medical, political, population, rural, social, transport, and urban geographies; plus biogeography, developing areas, geography & planning, geomorphology, higher education, industrial activity & area development, quantitative methods, women & geography, and history & philosophy of geography
  4. DEAR, M. J. (1986) 'Postmodernism and planning', *Soc. and Space* 4: 367–84; also LYOTARD, J.-F. (1984) *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis). An excellent simplified account of the range of debates in social theory is provided by CRAIB, I. (1984) *Modern social theory* (Wheatsheaf, Brighton). For more advanced summaries, see BAYNES, K., BOHMAN, J., McCARTHY, T. (eds) (1987) *After philosophy: end or transformation?* (MIT Press, Cambridge) and SKINNER, Q. (ed.) (1985) *The return of grand theory in the human sciences* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)
  5. Let me emphasize that I shall deal with only one aspect of the postmodern in my discussion. Two other constructs of postmodernism are very common: the first deals with postmodernism as a 'style', and the second as an 'epoch'. The sense of *postmodernism as a style* has had a significant effect on architecture, art and design in general. In the case of architecture, the notion of postmodernism rose rapidly to a status of a new fetish or iconography. In effect, a postmodern 'look' was achieved which (more often than not) was totally divorced from the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism. It has been disparagingly referred to as 'memory architecture' by its detractors, for its grafting of historical references onto contemporary designs; and its obituary has already appeared in architectural magazines. The 'disembodied' version of postmodern style does a great disservice to the spirit behind the movement. Postmodernism is not (or rather, should not be treated as) a matter of simple aesthetics. More recently, the concept of a *postmodern epoch*, or era, has been advanced. It is based on a belief that there has been some kind of radical break with past trends; that the sum of the new is sufficient to define a separable culture with identifiable historical limits. Those who advance (however provisionally) the notion of a postmodern epoch are grappling with one of the most fundamental problems in human knowledge: that of theorizing contemporaneity. How do we begin to make sense of an infinity of overlapping realities? Obviously, the contemporaneous appearance of two objects need not imply a causal relation; any landscape over time and space is more likely to consist of an anachronistic mixture of the obsolete, current and newborn artifacts. How can we make sense of such variety? There can be no easy answer to these questions. However, there is little doubt about their significance, especially given the scale and extent of current change in the world. For further discussion of these points, see DEAR, M. J. op. cit. (note 4)
  6. Quoted in BAYNES, K. *et al.*, op. cit. (note 4) p. 69
  7. See, respectively, RORTY, R. (1982) *The consequences of pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis); UNGER, R. M. (1986) *The critical legal studies movement* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge); and JENCKS, C. (1984) *The language of postmodern architecture* (Rizzoli, New York)
  8. Several essays on deconstruction are to be found in FOSTER, H. (ed) (1985) *Postmodern culture* (Pluto Press, London), and in BAYNES, K. *et al.*, op. cit. (note 4); and SKINNER, Q. op. cit. (note 4)
  9. This is precisely why the work of Olsson is so important; e.g., OLSSON, G. (1980) *Birds in egg* (Pion, London)
  10. The current text is no exception!
  11. In geography and planning, the assessment of postmodernism has been spearheaded by Phil Cooke, Derek Gregory, David Ley, Ed Soja and Michael Storper. COOKE, P. (1986) 'Modernity, postmodernity and the city', (unpublished paper); GREGORY, D. (forthcoming) *The geographical imagination*; LEY, D. (1987) 'Styles of the times: liberal and neo-conservative landscapes in inner Vancouver 1968–1986', *J. Hist. Geogr.* 13: 40–56; STORPER, M. (1987) 'The Post-Enlightenment challenge to Marxist urban studies', *Soc. and Space* 5 (forthcoming); and SOJA, E. (1986) 'Taking Los Angeles apart: fragments of a critical human geography', *Soc. and Space* 4: 255–72. An important impetus for much of their work was JAMESON, F. (1985) 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism', *New Left Rev.* 146: 53–92
  12. A wide-ranging discussion of social theory is to be found in GIDDENS, A. (1984) *The constitution of society* (University of California Press, Berkeley)
  13. One of the best recent examples of the utility of examining different theoretical approaches (in the case of the State) is ALFORD, R. A., FRIEDLAND, R. (1985) *Powers of theory* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)
  14. For an excellent discussion of this point, see SAYER, A. (1984) *Method in social science* (Hutchinson, London)
  15. Compare RORTY, R. op. cit. (note 7); also BERNSTEIN, R. J. (1986) *Philosophic profiles* (Polity Press, Cambridge)
  16. Nigel Thrift provides a comprehensive discussion of these concepts. THRIFT, N. (1983) 'On the determi-

- nation of social action in space and time', *Soc. and Space* 1: 23–57
17. One example of this kind of analysis in practice is to be found in DEAR, M. J., WOLCH, J. R. (1987) *Landscapes of despair: from deinstitutionalization to homelessness* (Princeton University Press, Princeton)
  18. I want to emphasize that the use of these conventional categories in no way implies my acceptance of the way in which the disciplines are currently practised; nor is my emphasis on locale to be read as support for a return to a traditional regional geography
  19. An alternative argument for rethinking history is forcefully made by SOJA, E. (1987) 'The reassertion of space in social theory: the next fin-de-siècle', (unpublished manuscript)
  20. Many writers, who are strongly motivated to restore geography, persist in this exclusionary form of discourse, including ABLER, R. op. cit. (note 2), and STODDART, D. R. op. cit. (note 2)
  21. I recognize that one's response to this challenge is a political decision as much as an intellectual choice. I cannot deal fully with the political ramifications of postmodernism in this paper. Some have used postmodernism to justify an 'Anything Goes' position which tends to be immediately translated into a defence of their existing theoretical bias. Such a position is, of course, totally antithetical to the interpretation presented in this essay. Others argue that the ultimately undecidable nature of theory and language must inevitably lead to political quietism. I believe this to be a fundamental misconception. Nothing can be more comforting to the status quo than to have concepts and categories neatly consigned to existing taxonomies (and prejudices), be they of the left or right. The stance of 'undecidability' is very much a political stance. It argues for a recasting of the concepts of politics and political action to take account of the restructuring of late-twentieth century society, as well as knowledge about that society