

Geography (human and urban)

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ABSTRACT: The entry begins with a definition of geography and with a description of what the discipline shares with the other social sciences and what makes it distinctive among them. Terminological clarifications are provided with regard to the relationship between human geography and physical geography, and between human geography and urban geography. After, a brief history and overview of human geography's engagement with social theory, the entry offers a discussion of the politicization of contemporary human geography and of how this phenomenon is reflected in theory building and concept development.

I dedicated my doctoral studies to (a) understanding the nature of geography as an academic discipline, (b) questioning whether it is worth keeping, and (c) exploring in general terms what could be done to improve it as a knowledge producer. By way of a definition, I concluded that geography is a generic

name for a set of various scientific practices, loosely held together, and thus identifiable by a common and long-standing concern for the big themes of 'space' and 'Earth's complexity', as well as by the networks generated through its having a distinct position in the academic division of labour (Simandan, 2005a-b). This definition has the advantage of highlighting the fact that geography today has become an umbrella term under which a wide variety of discursive practices operate, sometimes in genuine dialogue, and other times in relative isolation from one another. Just as anthropology's major divide is between cultural anthropology (social science oriented) and biological anthropology ("hard" sciences oriented), so too geography's major divide is between human geography and physical geography. There is an enormous literature (Matthews and Herbert, 2004) on how to bridge that divide and the tone of those discussions ranges from the pessimistic and resigned (they are really two distinct disciplines with almost nothing in common) to the enthusiastic (geography's main promise rests precisely in exploring and building bridges across that fertile divide). Human geography itself is an umbrella term for a wide variety of sub-disciplines, including, but not limited to: urban geography, rural geography, population geography, economic geography, social geography, cultural geography, historical geography, political geography, etc (Lee et al, 2014). Unlike the major divide between human and physical geography, the sub-disciplines that compose human geography are much less isolated from one another (Cresswell, 2012). Indeed, instead of divides, very often one encounters cross-pollination of sub-disciplines into hybrids such as urban economic geography, urban social geography, or urban historical geography.

Geography as a whole, or at least its human geography half, is customarily classified as a social science, together with sociology, political science, anthropology, social psychology, and economics. This raises the question of what human geography shares with the other social sciences and what makes it stand apart from them. Simply put, human geography studies social formations in all their variety and

complexity, just like the other social sciences. What makes human geography distinctive is the fact that it studies these social formations through a spatial lens, and it does so by developing and deploying a range of spatial concepts (cf. Valentine et al, 2008) that coalesce into a geographical way of thinking about social formations (Soja, 1989; Sack, 1997; Sheppard, 2015). To give an illustration, if a cultural anthropologist would research a town as a “culture”, and a sociologist as a “community”, a human geographer would likely approach that town as a “place”. Even though at first glance the object of study is the same – a town – how that object is being framed, explored, and theorized will be shaped by the conceptual apparatus through which it is grasped. A geographer would ask questions that derive from looking at that town as a place: what is the spirit of this place? (*genius loci*; Barnes, 2004); what is the sense of place of its inhabitants? (Mendoza and Moren-Alegret, 2013); how do humans and non-humans dwell there?; who is deemed as belonging to that place and who is out-of-place?

Until the middle of the 20th century, human geography was largely an idiographic, descriptive enterprise circumscribed by more-or-less explicit endorsements of environmental determinism and its more palatable cousin, possibilism (Livingstone, 2011). During the 1950s and the 1960s the discipline witnessed the so-called Theoretical and Quantitative Revolution, that is, the introduction of quantitative methodologies and the development of a conceptual apparatus that would allow geographers to do spatial analysis in a nomothetic manner (Barnes, 2011). If geography’s heavy engagement with, and recognition of the need for, theory begins with the Theoretical and Quantitative Revolution, its opening up to an infusion from *social* theory specifically, becomes highly significant only from the late 1960s onward (Johnston & Sidaway, 2004). Marxist social theory inspired human geographers to argue for a new kind of geography, one that is socially relevant, and one that speaks and contributes to the big social struggles of its times. David Harvey in particular was instrumental in developing a geographical

account of Marxism that became central to human geography's identity in the 1970s and the 1980s (Harvey, 1973, 2005; Jones A, 2009). Subsequent geographical engagements with social theory broadened beyond Marxism, to include anarchist theory (Springer, 2013, 2014), phenomenology (Relph, 1970; Simonsen, 2013) and post-phenomenology (Ash & Simpson, 2015), existentialism (Samuels, 1978), critical realism (Sayer, 2000), structuration theory (Thrift, 1983), feminist theory (Johnson, 2009), queer theory (Knopp, 2007), poststructuralism (Doel, 1999; Murdoch, 2006; Woodward et al, 2009), postcolonial theory (Blunt and McEwan, 2003), theories of performativity (Rose-Redwood & Glass, 2014) and embodiment (Nast and Pile, 1998), pragmatism (Hepple, 2008), and post-humanism (Castree et al, 2004), among others (see also Aitken and Valentine, 2006; Philo, 2009; Ruddick, 2009).

The extensive adoption and adaptation of social theories into human geography from the 1960s onward have dramatically altered the very meaning and mission of human geography. Indeed, to make sure that this altered meaning is remembered, many human geographers prefer to label themselves critical geographers or critical human geographers. The adjective "critical" can be deceptive, though, because being a critical human geographer means much more than simply having excellent critical thinking skills. Instead, the adjective "critical" must be understood ethically and politically as subscription to the belief that the world we currently have is rife with injustice (Best, 2009; Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2013) and that, therefore, the task of critical human geography is to fight for a much better world by: (a) exposing the injustice of the current world, and (b) developing geographical imaginations of new social orders that could and should replace the present state of affairs (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). There is, of course, a lot of variety among critical human geographers with regard to the social theories that most influenced them and with regard to the kind of injustice they are most likely to focus on: a Marxist geographer might attend preferentially to economic inequality and see Capitalism as the problem (Rossi,

2013), a feminist geographer might emphasize gender inequality and expose Patriarchy as the enemy (England, 2006), whereas an animal geographer would focus on the (un)ethical privileging of the human species and see Humanism and Speciesism as abhorrent (Lorimer, 2009). What they share is the agreement that the current social order is highly problematic and that the task of human geography today is not so much epistemological (truth-finding), as it is political (helping forge a better social order).

The politicised nature of human geography today can be observed in the manner in which conceptual and theoretical choices are being made (Woodward et al, 2012). The favored social ontology in Anglo-American human geography is one that is relational, process-oriented, anti-essentialist, flat (non-stratified, non-hierarchical), fluid, and contingent (Rose, 1993; Thrift, 2008; Whatmore, 2002; Massey, 2005; Simandan, 2010, 2011a; cf. Malpas, 2012). This favored social ontology depicts a world that is always in the process of re-constituting itself through the myriad practices and encounters of everyday life. Fundamentally, this ontology opens up “spaces of hope” (Harvey, 2000), because it emphasizes that the world is changeable, that we do not have to live with the current system, and that the agents of change are not some remote elites, but all of us, through our everyday choices (Larsen and Johnson, 2012; Barnett, 2014; Springer, 2014). Theory and concept development in human geography are best understood in this light, as political projects. I will point out only three such kinds of politicized theoretical developments: (1) the attempted discarding of suspect concepts, (2) the radical reworking of the meaning of still usable concepts, and (3) the political reclassification of entrenched geographical concepts.

Human geographers have become aware that some of our conceptual arsenal may be counterproductive to the extent that it cultivates and hardens regressive ways of thinking. “Scale” (Marston et al, 2005), for example, has been criticized for entertaining a stratified, hierarchical, and rigid understanding of the social world, so much so that one of the most cited geographers in the world claimed that “there is no such thing as a scale” (Thrift, 1995: 33). Instead, there is a shift to thinking in terms of actor-networks (Jóhannesson, J.O. Bærenholdt, 2009), assemblages (Muller, 2015), and sites (Joronen, 2013), all endorsed for inducing an understanding of the world as flat, heterogeneous, and fluid. Another set of concepts that are increasingly seen as counter-productive pertains to those binaries that split reality into a human part (society or culture) and a physical part (nature or the environment). Inspired by Bruno Latour’s (1993) “We have never been modern”, human geographers have argued that these culture/nature binaries are pernicious fictions of the modern project that blindside us from attending to the reality of a truly heterogeneous, truly hybrid world (with no such things as pure nature or pure culture; Whatmore, 2002; Jones O, 2009a; Castree, 2011).

In addition to the attempted discarding of suspect concepts, the politicized nature of conceptual and theoretical work in human geography can also be glimpsed from efforts to redefine the meaning of established concepts such as landscape, place (Agnew, 2011), space (Kitchin, 2009), distance (Simandan, 2013, 2016), and time (Crang, 2011). If in the first three quarters of the 20th century, landscape was understood as the objectively real material record “out there” (Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School of cultural ecology), the new cultural geography of the late 1980s and the 1990s politicized the notion by redefining it as a “way of seeing” (Wylie, 2011). This manoeuvre shifted analytical attention from the “what is being looked at” to the “who is doing the looking” and thereby enabled incisive descriptions of the unjust power relations reproduced through practices of representation. More recently, geographers

who subscribe to non-representational theory, post-humanism, and neovitalist materialisms, more generally, have attempted a further redefinition of landscape as dwelling (Jones O, 2009b; Wylie, 2011). This move undoes the subject/object dichotomy of Western epistemologies, decenters the human subject, and emphasizes the embodied, performative, immanent, heterogeneous, and relational features of landscape. Thinking of landscape as dwelling extends agency to non-human actors and this ontological claim enables a broadening of the definition of the political, as well as of the sphere of ethical considerability.

Finally, a third kind of politicized conceptual work in human geography today consists in introducing finer-grained distinctions within existing concepts, thus repurposing them into tools that can help steer political consciousness onto more effective trajectories. To give an example, “environments” have recently been re-classified alongside two independent axes (Simandan, 2011b): lenient-versus-exacting environments, and kind-versus-wicked environments. That classification in turn has been deployed to contrast the wicked and exacting nature of the contemporary neoliberal environment with the lenient and kind nature needed for those utopian environments dreamed about by critical human geographers today.

SEE ALSO: Critical Theory; Hybridity and hybridization; Marxism; Ontology; Social Theory and Theorizing; Spatial Turn; Urban Planning.

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