

Kinds of environments—a framework for reflecting on the possible contours of a better world

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One of the significant developments in the interdisciplinary field of judgment and decision making is the classification of environments as a function of (a) their capacity to enable people to learn from experience (kind environments vs. wicked environments) and (b) the consequences of having failed to understand and adapt to them (exacting environments vs. lenient environments). Based on the premise that 'environment' is a key geographical concept, I explore the usefulness of appropriating these classifications in geography and argue that they can stimulate normative work on the possible contours of a better world as well as illuminate in novel ways long-standing geographical concerns with the problematic of fairness.

Keywords: environment, normativity, neoliberalism, moral geographies, learning, fairness

Les figures de l'environnement : éléments de réflexion sur les bases envisageables d'un monde meilleur

Parmi les innovations qui ont marqué la recherche interdisciplinaire sur le jugement et la décision, se trouve la classification des environnements définie en fonction : a) d'un mécanisme de base par lequel on peut tirer des enseignements de l'expérience (des environnements sains par opposition aux environnements hostiles) et b) des effets néfastes liés au fait que l'on n'a pas été en mesure de comprendre et de s'adapter (des environnements rigoureux par opposition aux environnements permissifs). En partant du principe selon lequel « l'environnement » est un concept central en géographie se pose la question de la pertinence de situer ces classifications dans une perspective géographique. Cette étude fait valoir qu'elles peuvent en effet dynamiser les travaux afin de formuler des normes permettant d'établir les bases envisageables d'un monde meilleur et de jeter un nouvel éclairage sur les enjeux géographiques autour de la problématique de l'équité.

Mots clés : environnement, normativité, néolibéralisme, géographies de la moralité, apprentissage, équité

The introduction of a new set of conceptual distinctions in a discipline is warranted to the extent that it illuminates previously unacknowledged aspects of reality, deepens the understanding of otherwise recalcitrant research puzzles, unifies hitherto disconnected avenues of enquiry, or fosters progressive political engagements (Massey 2008). In this commentary, I will bring to the attention of geographers two cri-

teria for classifying environments introduced in the interdisciplinary literature on judgment and decision making by Robin Hogarth (Hogarth *et al.* 1991; Hogarth 2001). The conceptual distinctions stemming from the application of these criteria have the potential not only to stimulate normative reflection on the possible contours of a better world but also to articulate four distinct geographical concerns: the theorization of the environment as a key disciplinary concept (Holloway *et al.* 2008), the literature on learning (the learning individual, the learning city, the learning region; Hudson 1999), the moral

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geography of fairness/unfairness (Smith 2001), and the geographical political economy of capitalism and neoliberalism (Peck and Theodore 2007).

Three brief observations help delineate the scope of this commentary. First, these criteria can be just as fruitfully applied to other geographical categories (e.g., to the concept of 'place'). Second, no academic literature is innocent and, therefore, I refer the readers interested in exploring the epistemological foundations of the literature on judgment and decision making to the work of Hammond (1996) and Nickerson (2008). Third, in what follows I define environments in the same way as organizational ecology does, as including everything (social relations, physical environment) that surrounds a particular agent. This simple definition has the added advantage that it enables the analysis of the environment of a given agent at a variety of geographical scales, ranging from the neighbourhood to the global.

The first criterion distinguishes environments with regard to their capacity to facilitate learning through correction or remediation. *Kind environments* provide sufficient feedback on an agent's actions (may that agent be an individual, a city, a social movement, a nation, etc.) that the diligent agent has the opportunity to improve its future performance. *Wicked environments*, by contrast, do not allow an agent to learn from its past actions because the feedback they provide is delayed, ambiguous, vague, incomplete, distorted, or deliberately misleading. In a kind environment, long-term immersion leads to improved performance over time as a result of having learned from experience, whereas in a wicked environment, performance is likely to remain at the same level or even decline as a result of the unwarranted confidence ensuing from the delusional belief that one has learned the right lessons from experience. This first criterion brings into the geographical literature on learning a heightened sensitivity to the fact that the amount and quality of learning is a joint function of both agent and its environment and, by way of logical implication, it underscores a central idea animating the geographical study of fairness: the attribution of moral blame to individual agents is often a perverse ideological

action that obscures the extent to which the individual agent is the product of its environment (Butler 1997; Allen 2003).

The second criterion for classifying environments complements the first by focusing attention on the fundamental political problem of how environments punish agents for their errors and mistakes. *Lenient environments* allow agents to survive and get by, even if they have failed to learn the right lessons and have committed a long string of mistakes, whereas *exact-ing environments* severely punish those with low performance. The theoretical and political significance of this distinction becomes apparent when it is carefully mapped into geographers' long-standing research of the workings of capitalism and neoliberalism. The safety net provided by a socialist or welfare state regime makes them humane, lenient environments in sharp contrast with the documented cruel, ruthless exactingness of neoliberal social orders (note that the relevant geographical literature, e.g., De Verteuil *et al.* 2009, uses the terms 'punitive turn' or 'punitive age' to refer to neoliberal exactingness). But the moral indictment of neoliberalism becomes especially powerful when one cross-classifies environments using both criteria and realizes that a neoliberal regime is both a wicked and exacting environment. It is wicked because the feedback provided to agents is incomplete (excessive attention to the causal relevance of positive agency and individual responsibility at the expense of negative agency and collective responsibility) and downright misleading (objective reality shrouded in the ideology of free-markets); it is exacting because the punishment administered to those who fail is unnecessarily harsh and violates basic standards of human dignity (Harvey 2003). The joint application of these criteria to the geographical analysis of capitalism and neoliberalism enables scholars committed to the ideal of a better world to explain in a more precise and articulate manner why and how these political formations are morally repugnant. Not only do they fail to give people a second chance (exacting environments), but they also deprive them of their first chance, namely that of trying to learn the *actual* rules of the game (wicked environments).

Significant difficulties may arise when trying to classify whole political systems according to

WICKED & LENIENT ENVIRONMENTS	KIND & LENIENT ENVIRONMENTS
WICKED & EXACTING ENVIRONMENTS	KIND & EXACTING ENVIRONMENTS

Figure 1
Cross-classification of environments according to their differential capacity to foster genuine learning and their willingness to forgive past mistakes and provide second chances.

these simple criteria. Bearing in mind the fact that environments themselves should be seen as processes, and not simply as 'static contexts', then we can decide in which quadrant to allocate various places, provided that we remain aware of the heuristic nature of this exercise and of the unavoidable epistemic violence committed in any attempt at classifying the world (see Simandan 2005). More to the point, within each political system there is a degree of social differentiation, such that the very same system might be lenient and kind for some, and exacting and wicked for others. When I say that neoliberalism is exacting and wicked, I have in mind the majority of the population subjected to neoliberal rule, not the privileged few. Note also that while socialism advertises itself as kind and lenient for all, many would argue that actual socialist regimes have been neither kind nor lenient for the majority of their population.

Oscar Wilde observed in 1891 that 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at' (Wilde 2001, 141). Bearing this observation in mind, the twin criteria for classifying environments open up new prospects for a geography of hope (Harvey 2000; Castree 2007; see also Anderson and Fenton 2008; Anderson and Holden 2008). In the matrix that emerges from cross-classifying environments by these criteria (Figure 1) one can note the presence of a cell for kind *and* lenient environments,

the exact opposite of wicked and exacting environments.

The task of making the world a better place is arduous not only because replacing existing social formations is likely to be very difficult, but also because the powers of our utopian, creative social thinking seem to lag behind our capacity for social and political critique. To enable people to think of a better order, we need a way to define that ideal in a more precise, graspable manner or, to put it differently, we need a minimal set of desiderata that would be met by that yet-to-be-born better world. The idea of an environment that is at once both kind and lenient should be at the core of that minimal set because only such an environment could properly be said to be fair.

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