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Title: Geography: Positivism or Phenomenology?

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Geography: Positivism or Phenomenology

Theory seeks commonalities in particular sequences of real occurrences for the purpose of replication in the imagination (Peet 1998). With positivism, theory generates hypotheses that are subject to empirical validation or falsification with the aim of formulating general law (Guelke 1971). In geography, this positivist notion of theory was linked with the quantitative revolution which attempted to establish geographical theories that are distinctively spatial science (Gregory, Johnston et al. 2009). By late 1960s, humanistic geography grounded in phenomenology emerged as a series of critical reactions to this positivist notion of geography (Peet 1998). Before the paper proceeds to the discussion of positivism and phenomenology in modern geographical thought, it must be acknowledged not only that geography remains a discipline deeply suspicious of theory (Gregory, Johnston et al. 2009), its identity debates remain far from settled.

August Comte defined positivist science as the study of empirically observable phenomena and the relationships between them. This implies that there is a common method of observation, so that experiments are replicable providing that scientists proceed in the same way (Keat and Urry 1982; Johnston 1986). When errors occur in the process of verification, it is the failure of the scientists not the science. Possible explanations could be that the scientists had wrongly assembled the theory and model, or that the hypotheses were irrelevantly applied, or that the testing procedure was invalidly conducted (Johnston 1986). Keat (1981) named this the conception of science or scientific method – a process that

involves rigorous enquiry and the search for generalizations. This is only a part of logical positivism which claimed to be the only valid path to true knowledge (Keat 1981; Johnston 1986).

For logical positivists, most of the traditional ontological and epistemological dilemmas are classified as metaphysical, and thus outside the scope of rational discussion (Giddens 1981). One of the internal disagreements for logical positivists involves the issue of the hierarchy of science. While the Comtian philosophers endorse a hierarchy of science that begins with physics, and proceeding through chemistry, biology, psychology and sociology, in which all are reduced to the first (Keat and Urry 1982). Durkheim and followers do not advocate scientific hierarchy as such, but insist more strongly than Comte on the autonomy of sociology as a distinctive field of endeavor (Giddens 1981).

Positivism has been severely criticized for severing the transcendental inquiry into the meaning of knowledge, of which it considers as meaningless in regards to the achievements of modern science (Habermas 1971). As cited in Peet (1998), Kierkegaard refused to fit the unique and concrete being of the individual human into any system constructed by rational thought. And as the first modern existentialist, Kierkegaard (1941) attempted to challenge the positivist notion of science which states that everything is causally determined, and hence can be objectively explained in terms of general laws. Following the same endeavor, Husserl (1970) criticized the positivist notion of scientific rigor for conditioning scholars to exclude all subjective positions, and to define objective truth exclusively in terms of empirical facts. Through phenomenology, Husserl therefore attempted to restructure science by suspending all empirical, rational, and scientific

judgment to disclose the essential intentional contact between consciousness and the world. The goal of phenomenology is to return to the ‘original data of man’s experience’, and to provide a conceptual clarification of these data by delineating the consecutive structures which constitute them (Pickles 2009).

Heidegger, Husserl’s student, however rejected Husserl’s transcendental idealism (Pickles 2009) and/ or the assumption that there is mind or consciousness as an obvious starting point (Peet 1998). Heidegger’s main project in phenomenology was to emphasize the importance of “being”. As Waterhouse (1981) stated it is impossible to appreciate Heidegger’s work unless one has some conception of what he meant by the ‘problem of Being’. ‘Being’ as a concept, according to Heidegger (1962), has three important characteristics – universality, indefinability, and the self evidence. Heidegger’s question of being therefore aims at an a priori condition of the possibility not only of the sciences which investigate beings as such, but also at the condition of the possibility of the ontology. This is because all ontology is fundamentally deceptive if it has not previously clarified the meaning of being sufficiently and grasped this clarification as its fundamental task (Heidegger 1962; Pickles 2009). For that reason, Heidegger (1962) attacked the Kantians for not coming to grips with the problem of reality of being too concerned with knowledge and not enough with existence. The substance of Heidegger’s argument is that each world has its characteristic form of being and its own type of truth. But these are unified through expression, which is the meaningful articulation by intellect of the truth of being, and yet expression is through language, and language always occurs in certain characteristic forms (Waterhouse 1981). Therefore, phenomenology, in Heidegger’s words, seeks methodically

and carefully, “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Macquarrie and Robinson 1962).

The spectre of positivism and the need to enter into historical reflection on the social sciences were the two major reasons to explain geography’s need for positivism (Pickles 2009). Positivist notion of explanation was incorporated into geography through the use of Kuhn’s language of paradigm and paradigm shift, an endeavor that was severely criticized. Mair (1986) argued, and Stoddart (1990) concurred, that geographers had paid insufficient attention to the context and content of Kuhn’s project, and thus had seriously misunderstood and improperly utilized Kuhn’s concepts. In addition, Peet (1998) stated that positivism was brought into geographical thought when Schaffer rejected Hartshorn’s notion of geography as a unique integrating science and instead proposed spatial relations as geography’s real subject matter (Schaeffer 1953). Burton declared that geography had undergone a radical transformation of spirit and purpose through the quantitative revolution with an emphasis on the construction and testing of theoretical models (Burton 1963). Berry (1964) even specified that geography as a spatial science is based on logical positivist mode of explanation. And the first law of geography should be that everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things (Tobler 1970). Harvey (1970) once recommended that geography should utilize the formal geometric language and theorems to generate consistent, coherent, and empirically justified, body of information upon which to base geographical ontology and epistemology. From this positivist standpoint, geographers look at environment and see space in terms of standard units of measurement and people in terms of statistical number (Peet 1998).

This positivist notion of geography was heavily criticized by humanist geographers who claim to have utilized phenomenology as their mode of explanation to the study of geographic space and place. The major concept derived from the application of phenomenological methods in humanist geography is the geographical life-world, which consists of three interrelated phenomena of experience – space as experienced, landscape as the bounding surface of space, and place as the center of meaning in space and landscape (Fu Tuan 1974; Buttner 1976; Relph 1976). The relation between these components, according to Relph (1976), form the concept of ‘Geographicality’ which seeks to reflect the very manner in which environments in all their forms, either constructed or natural spaces and landscapes, are experienced.

Relph (1976) further argued that this concept of Geographicality constitutes the most complete phenomenological basis for geography because through it the central geographical concepts such as space, landscape and place can be traced directly back to their sources of origin. Buttner (1976) was rather skeptical about this claim stating that the epistemological and ontological difficulties in relating the phenomenological notion of life-world to geographic language and endeavor remain controversially complex. Geographers, according to Buttner (1976), are aware of the active role of physical and cultural milieu in shaping experience, and for this reason their use of the terms space and world is different. And rarely have geographers made a phenomenological investigation of their own perception (Buttner 1976). Taking the argument further, Pickles accused humanistic geographers for failing to understand the basic concepts and core objectives in phenomenology, and therefore misconstrued the relationship between phenomenology and

science by arguing for a non-objectification as the goal of human science (Peet 1998; Pickles 2009). For that reason, Pickles (2009) suggested that the ontological structure of phenomenological geography should focus on the critique of taken-for-granted geographical concepts of space and to explicate a place-centered ontology of human spatiality.

The paper has thus far argued that the matter of interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, is the key issue in this discussion of the integration between geography and phenomenology (Pickles 2009) as well as geography and positivism (Mair 1986). However, taken into account geography, defined in this paper as a discipline that studies the human-environment relationships, phenomenological notion of explanation coupled with actor-network theory is arguably more productive theoretically than that of logical positivist. The first argument is that should logical positivism be the philosophical, ideological, and theoretical high ground of geography, the discipline would dissolve half of its identity. That is because, to reiterate Giddens (1981), geography that is based on logical positivism would consider half of its traditional ontology and epistemology as belonging to metaphysics and thus irrational for discussion. Should this be the case, geography is theoretically dead because according to Law (1999) only dead theories celebrate their self-identity, insist upon their perfect reproduction, and seek to reflect and replicate previous practices.

From Pickles' critique of humanist geographers' misinterpretation of the link between geography and phenomenology, one might then argue that shall the principle concepts in phenomenology are appropriately adhered to, geography grounded in phenomenology has

the potential to claim its status as a discipline that seeks true knowledge by focusing on both objective and subjective empirical data. To proceed, one must then reconcile the point of disagreement between Husserl and Heidegger's conception of phenomenology – transcendental intersubjectivity and the question of being. As argued in this paper, Heidegger accused Husserl's transcendental intersubjectivity, which is based on Kant's transcendental idealism (Macquarrie and Robinson 1962), for obliterating the whole concept of phenomenology. However, Heidegger's *Being and Time* is only the truncated beginning of his grand endeavor to reveal the question of Being and to articulate on the destruction of the history of ontology. Heidegger did not accomplish this mission, and consequently phenomenology remains an inopportune misunderstood theoretical conception (Waterhouse 1981).

Finally, should one attempts to further Heidegger's conception of the principle purpose of phenomenology in order that it could be beneficial for geographical knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge in general, the initial task would require one to concentrate on this pressing question that involves the search for an epistemology or methodology that can integrate subjectivity and objectivity in a scientific discussion where a priori assumptions are held in abeyance. In this endeavor, one might find that exploring Law's (1992) actor-network theory concepts such as entities relativity, performativity, durability, the process of translation, a theoretically productive exercise.

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GEOG318: Explanation in Geography
Pheakkdey Nguon

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