

Approaching Human Geography: Towards New Approaches in Human Geography?

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REVIEW ARTICLE

APPROACHING HUMAN GEOGRAPHY: TOWARDS NEW APPROACHES IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY?

by
Frank Hansen

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ABSTRACT. This article is an extended review of a recently published book by P. Cloke, C. Philo and D. Sadler: *Approaching human geography: an introduction to contemporary theoretical debates*. London: Paul Chapman 1991, 252 pp. ISBN 1-85396-100-0. The author of this review takes the book as a starting-point for an assessment on contemporary approaches in human geography.

The first part of the title above is taken from a new and very interesting book on contemporary theoretical debates in human geography. The second part relates to the main question I expected to find an answer to in the book, namely, can we talk about new ways of approaching the subject matter of our discipline?

As the subtitle of the book indicates, it is an introduction to contemporary theoretical debates in human geography. A considerable merit of the book is that it takes us beyond the ground covered by previous overviews in the same genre (e.g. Chisholm, Gregory, Holt-Jensen, Johnston). It not only deals with traditional regional geography, with nomothetic quantitative human geography, and with the radical and the humanistic reactions to the latter. It also deals with reactions to the reactions. It sees in the radical alternative a strong and problematic tendency toward a structuralistic, objectivistic and mechanistic point of view. In the humanistic alternative it finds the opposite bias towards an individualistic and subjectivistic point of view. Therefore, the authors provide a detailed introduction to three new 'ways of approaching' which attempt to transcend the dualisms dividing structuralist and humanistic geography. Thus, over half the book is a critical introduction to structuration theory and its application in human geogra-

phy, realist approaches and postmodern human geography.

In the following I will first provide a brief presentation of the main themes and points of the book. This is followed by a critical evaluation, focussing on some major issues, some of which are bypassed in the book. The final part deals with the progress of the discussion in the book and with its conclusions. While I would agree with the conclusion that we cannot expect to develop or maintain one common approach, but should rather expect diversity in the future human geography, I had expected more conclusions in the form of statements concerning the ongoing debates, especially those across the borderlines between realism and structuration theory, and between modernism and post-modernism, i.e. suggestions concerning how we are to continue the search in the future. In order to be more conclusive, I think we need to develop an explicit conceptualisation of what we mean by approach. The discussion below is very much influenced by my own attempt to conceptualize the word approach. The concept is therefore presented in the box below.

An approach is constituted by at least the following elements:

- a philosophy of science, including a model of human agency,
- a social ontology about the constitution of society, and the individual-society relationship, and
- a set of specific social theories depending upon the subject matter of the enquiry.

I find it important to stress that philosophy and science are linked, and neither can be reduced to the other. This means that the distinction between ontology and social ontology, as well as between social ontology and social theory, must be taken seriously. Finally I presuppose that social science by its very nature must be cross-disciplinary.

The main themes

The book opens with a brief overview of human geographic thought from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s. The early geography is characterized by two essential points of view, environmental determinism and regional differentiation, which are both exemplified and discussed. Geography as a spatial science is regarded as a reaction to the lack of relevance and to the idiographic nature of early regional geography. A new geography, quantitative and nomothetic, developed. Here the authors present some old and some new criticisms of the new nomothetic science of geography.

One line of critique of the new spatial science is based upon radical Marxist thought. The next chapter is concerned with its development within human geography. It starts with a short description of the Marxist conceptualisation of the capitalist system and then provides a more detailed introduction to historical materialism, which is regarded as the grounding theoretical basis of Marxist method. Then follows an investigation into what is perceived as four phases of radical geography: from liberal to Marxist critique, Marxist theoretical foundation, reconsidering structuralism and the possible disintegration of radical geography. Mostly the works of Harvey are employed in the discussion of the different phases. They are given a short presentation as are some of the critiques of his work. In the center of the discussion are structuralism and functionalism, including the Marxist attempts to change their understanding of the role of structures. Finally the authors pose the question if Marxist geography is in a process of degeneration, with reference to recent debate in *Society and Space* and debate on locality studies.

The next type of critique to be presented is that which originates from humanistic geography. Its historical development is investigated, starting with its roots in European humanistic thought together with its roots in early human geography, especially Vidal and Wright. Then follows an introduction to humanistic geography as a humanistic critique of positivistic geography with its objectified human beings. Geography has to deal with human values and ideas to be really human. Included in the introduction is a presentation of phenomenology, one of the philosophies of science which claims to be a cornerstone of humanistic geography. A further development is existential geography, based upon later phenomenological

philosophers, the existentialists, who were critical of Husserlian phenomenology. Curiously, one of the key concepts in humanistic geography, 'place', is treated en passant. The chapter ends with a look into the possibility if humanistic geography can endeavour to be a social science, i.e. transcend the individualism and subjectivism embedded in its original philosophy of science. Here we are introduced to hermeneutic and ethnographic methods as possible means to reach that end.

Structuration theory is described as a way of integrating structure and agency. The chapter focuses mainly upon the works of Giddens, a few of his critics and some empirical investigations in human geography based upon his ideas. His work is divided into two phases. The first deals with the development of Giddens's thought on the constitution of society, formulated in his model of human action and his conceptualisation of the duality of structure and system of action. Phase two involves the development of understanding the relation between social processes and time-space. It starts with a short description of time-geography and Giddens's critique of it. Then follows a presentation of his understanding of the two types of integration in modern society and their constitution in time-space and of his two key concepts, locale and modes of regionalisation. This small section ends with a presentation of his distinctions between front and back regions and between central and peripheral regions as part of a discussion of time-space and scales of regionalisation. Two examples of the empirical implementation of structuration theory in human geography are presented: the works of Pred and of Gregory. In Gregory's work we find some very fundamental criticisms of Giddens's way of conceptualizing time-space routinisation as well as time-space distanciation. Finally, the chapter summarizes critique of structuration theory, concluding favourably that it provides a basis to sustain "middle ground" theory.

Then follows a chapter about realism as philosophy of science and its use in human geography. The foundations of this philosophy are presented and the central notion of naturalism in social science is discussed. Realism can be broken down into two currents: the naturalism of Bhaskar versus the anti-naturalism of Harré. Ties to hermeneutics and critical theory are outlined, followed by a more detailed presentation of epistemological and methodological aspects of realism, relying very much upon the work of Sayer. Sayer's methodological distinction between intensive and extensive

research is clarified. In general the focus in the chapter is upon realism as an epistemology. Like the chapter on structuration theory, this chapter also includes a presentation of examples of empirical research efforts, and a summary of critique. The review reveals major disagreements between human geographers concerning realism.

The chapter about postmodern human geography is divided into two parts, one about postmodernism as object and one about postmodernism as attitude. The first centres on different cultural aspects of recent changes in consumption patterns with respect to literature, architecture, urban space and the like. The cultural products of postmodernity are seen as a rapidly changing collage which defies categorisation. Flexibility, diversity and differentiation are the key words used to describe this new human world. As a little intermezzo, this new postmodernistic world is then given a modernistic explanation as the newest phase of capitalism by a few modernists, among them Harvey, against whom the authors later insist that postmodernism must be considered in its own terms, not as a mere reflection of recent developments in global capitalism.

Postmodernism is best understood as a qualitatively new attitude. This new attitude is critical towards the Enlightenment (modernism) thought, with its belief in Reason and Order, and is very sensitive to difference, including geographical difference. It is against any grand narrative and any approach building upon ideas of a total history. The French philosophers Lyotard and Foucault are considered the architects of postmodernism's philosophical foundation (to the extent it is possible to speak of a foundation). Contrary to the other chapters, this one does not include any examples of what empirical postmodernist human geography could be like.

The very short epilogue is not a conclusion in favor of a common new approach to be recommended. The authors do not see any common ground for a future human geography. They are in favor of diversity, pointing to the variety of different subject matters, and argue for the need for different approaches. The book finishes on a hopeful tone, with a view towards creative and fruitful dialogue in the future between different approaches and a community of common concern.

Some critical points

The introductory chapter on historical traditions

in geographic thought could have been developed more, in ways which could have contributed to discussions which arise later in the book. For instance, important issues about the conceptions of science and different forms of naturalism in early geographic thought are ignored, though discussion of them could have provided a useful background to later chapters. Generally, I doubt that environmental determinism was quite as dominant as postulated here. While a paradigm of land-man dependency did predominate, its most deterministic forms were not prevalent. The common approach in the early tradition, at least on the continent, was a cultural historical approach, along the lines of Ratzel. Ratzel, a founder of political geography and social geography, and influential in the development of cultural anthropology, can hardly be blamed for environmental determinism. The interesting issue in this context has to do with the forms of naturalism of the early geographers and their interpretation of human geography as a non-social science. It may be instructive to regard the idiographic/nomothetic dichotomy as an important distinction in the interpretation of changes in human geography during this century and to see Hartshorne and Schaefer as opponents. But often a perhaps even more important distinction—that of realism versus idealism—is ignored. Hartshorne, whose work is given very little attention in the book, codifies many important changes within traditional geography, one of which is the shift towards idealism (the change from region as individual/organism to region as intellectual construction). In this sense Hartshorne is more properly perceived as Schaefer's predecessor than his antagonist.

The chapter about Marxism and human geography is generally better and much more detailed. It provides a good introduction to Marxist geography, but is not without its problems. First, I miss an introduction to the Marxist conception of science, which should perhaps not be called Marxist since essential parts of it were common to many scientists before and during Marx's lifetime, especially among the classical political economists. It is a realist conception bearing strong resemblances with Bhaskarian realism, with abstraction and abstract research as a key methodological element. This is why Sayer can use Marxist theorising as an example of intensive (realist) research. It is therefore somewhat artificial to, as the authors do, regard Marxism and realism as oppositional. If Marxist and realist geographers are opponents it is not due

to their conceptions of science (and realism is not more than that) but to their social ontologies and theories. Marxism on the other hand is of course much more than a conception of science. But this at the same time tells us that quite different human geographies can be formulated on the basis of a realist philosophy of science, among them a Marxist one. We can not talk about one realistic approach!

Second, the authors over-emphasize the role that historical materialism has played in human geography at least as a theory of history. I know very few examples where it has been used. On the contrary, much research was constructed precisely upon a critique of the dogmatism of historical materialism as historical theory, as manifested in various neo-Marxisms such as Althusserian structuralism, the capital logic school of thought, or Marx's own basic understanding of capitalism and of its political economy. If historical materialism has played a role it is as a social ontology, not as a theory of history.

As to the disintegration of the 'Marxist tradition', the book presents a very confusing picture. It is of course difficult to say exactly what constitutes Marxist research. But it becomes even more difficult without any clearly articulated Marxist philosophy of science, as indicated above. I would argue that an important part of realistic research—based either on a Marxist understanding of capitalist society or upon a revision of Marxist political economy—must be regarded as reformulations within a Marxist tradition. The work of Massey and Meegan is just one example. This means that much more reformulation and elaboration of Marxist human geography has taken place than the authors pretend. The picture becomes even more warped when contributions to the locality debate are uncritically (and dubiously) presented as Marxist, presumably because the authors have a history of Marxist research. The much acclaimed disintegration may be less than is assumed.

The chapter on humanistic geography also serves as a solid and informative introduction, even if it must have been more difficult to compose because varieties are even more numerous than within Marxist geography. What I welcome very much (as compared to previous overviews) is the presentation of phenomenology and existentialism as possible elements of a philosophical foundation of a humanistic human geography. But then, I miss a discussion of the conception of sci-

ence following from these viewpoints, leaving aside the formulated anti-scientific attitude among some humanistic geographers as not interesting. What is their alternative to naturalistic social science, towards which they are so negative? Furthermore, what does it mean for such a science that it is based upon an idealistic philosophy (transcendental idealism, to use Husserl's expression).

I agree with the authors in that human geography is not about individuals, but about groups. But this raises a major problem for humanistic geography: how do we transcend the human in order to understand the social? I also agree with the authors when they, with reference to the work of Ley, indicate that philosophy does not help us further. But I have considerable doubts about their proposed solution, to rely on hermeneutic methods or ethnographic inquiry. This may come down to a return to empiricism if the groups are formed as empirical generalisations, based upon a phenomenological—existentialist vocabulary. One alternative could perhaps be that qualitative inductive methods are used instead to form abstract social categories. Another alternative would be to start with social theory! But this requires that one have some idea of structures and social relations in society beforehand. It raises a final question, which is not raised in the book: Do not humanistic geographers need a social ontology, i.e. explicit ideas about the individual and the constitution of society, power etc., in order to be social geographers? I believe so. Transcendental philosophies may provide good inspiration, but they can not replace social ontology.

The introduction to structuration theory is short and concise, but at the same time comprehensive. It also raises a number of important critical points toward structuration theory. The authors fail however to make it sufficiently clear that we are not dealing with a theory, but a social ontology, based on a philosophy of human action. It consists of generalisations about the constitution of society as such. First when Giddens embarks on a study of modernity (his third phase) can one talk of theory. Instead of criticising Giddens for approaching 'grand theory', as the authors do, it would be correct to acknowledge that Giddens's structuration theory is a social ontology, and any social ontology will include statements involving universal categories of social being. This should not be confused with 'grand theory'. I find this point important, because the popularity of structuration theory is due not

only to its anti-structuralism and its focus upon the time-space constitution of social processes, but also to the fact that the proposed social ontology is congruent with not all, but politically quite different theoretical positions—precisely because it is a social ontology and not a social theory.

In another respect, Giddens's approach is very open to different interpretations. He has for instance not formulated any explicit account of his philosophy of science. Is he inclined towards an interpretative social science or a realist one? Marxists would probably argue the former, as would humanistic social geographers. And there is hardly any evidence in Giddens's discourse on social science that would suggest the latter. Giddens rejects positivist naturalism, but as he does not deal with realist naturalism, his apparently anti-naturalist position remains ambivalent. This reader at least is curious what Giddens's position is on Bhaskarian realism, since he fails to give any clear indications of his stance.

The chapter on realist approaches is a fine introduction to realism as an epistemology in its Bhaskarian version. It fails to recognize however that realism also involves an ontological point of view. Furthermore, Harre's significantly different version of realism is not sufficiently described. This may not be such an important oversight, since it is the Bhaskarian version, as popularized by Sayer, which is flourishing among human geographers. But it would nevertheless have been beneficial to include Harre's realism as a contrast to and a critical light upon Bhaskar's ideas.

In the discussion of a possible convergence with hermeneutics and critical theory, the authors rightly emphasize a common emancipatory interest shared with critical theory. Realism is also a critical approach. On the other hand, Bhaskar is very critical of hermeneutics, due to among other things its antinaturalism and lack of conceptual criticism.

As mentioned above, realism is nothing more than a philosophy of science upon which different approaches can be formulated, among them Marxist ones. This is perhaps indicated by the authors in the title of the chapter, where they refer to realist approaches in plural. But they do not put it on the agenda for a discussion. Here it would have been interesting with a discussion of which types of social ontologies which can be combined with a realist philosophy of science. And it would have been interesting with an outline of Bhaskar's own social ontological proposals.

The analysis of postmodernism is pursued primarily at an empirical level, and thus lacks in depth of reflections at a conceptual level. Though the presentation of the understandings of Harvey and other modernists includes elements of (and an invitation to) such reflection, the authors do not make any conceptual specifications concerning postmodernism. Thus, one is left unsure if the authors see postmodernism primarily as culture and consumption related, or if it may be perceived as normatively more inclusive.

The attempt to sketch postmodernism as an attitude in opposition to the Enlightenment-modernism project is also doubtful in the sense that the latter is not something agreed upon. Not everybody just believed in Enlightenment, Reason and Progress! Many of the modernist thinkers were sceptical and deeply critical, e.g. Rousseau, Marx, the Frankfurt school. It is a naïve idealistic version of modernism, a strawman, and not modernism as such which is presented. In this connection I find it very surprising that the authors accept the ontological claim of Lyotard, that the world is constituted of nothing but fragmented clouds of communication. Is this all that is left of social relations?!

To use Lyotard and Foucault as a common philosophical platform of postmodernism is also doubtful. Is the rebellion against metanarratives parallel to the rebellion against totalized history? I do not think so. Foucault speaks favorably of 'distinct totalities', and refers to Marx as the first to rebel against total history. Furthermore, could the Foucaultian conceptions of knowledge, power and society not be regarded as metanarratives in a Lyotardian sense? The assumption that they express the same attitude toward modernism demands a much closer examination of their thought than is included in the book.

The focus of postmodernism is presented as being diversity, difference. But do all types of differences matter? And are all differences of equal importance? I am sure that the authors agree with me that we must make priorities among differences—priorities which fundamentally are based upon ethical considerations. And I agree with them that we have not been sensitive enough in the past to some types of differences manifested in weak groups in society. But this does not mean that we must equally consider all sorts of fanciful differences, which I see as a move in an ethically wrong direction. It has for many years already been considered a sign of progress that curiosity about differences is being replaced by concern

about inequalities. I would suggest that it still is, and would warn against making difference the focus of future human geography (remember areal differentiation?). But I am aware that we also must deal with differences and othernesses from the point of view of human rights and non-discrimination. Furthermore, I would stress more forcefully than the authors do, that sensitivity to difference carries greater potential the more it is theoretically informed.

Some general critical points

I miss a more systematic account of some common issues in philosophy of science, such as the understanding of human action, and the central distinctions between empiricism and realism, and between naturalism and antinaturalism, especially since empiricism and naturalism have such a strong foothold in human geography. Another common issue could have been the conceptualization of space. Such systematic accounts could have formed the basis for:

- a more continuous discussion with greater potential to reach new insights,
- a more critical attitude toward the use of history to legitimate recent approaches (e.g., to use Vidal as precursor to humanistic geography ought to raise a discussion on the adequacy of his naturalism), and
- a realization that Marxist geography is just one among several alternative transcendental realist human geographies.

Another factor that contributes to the unnecessarily blurred picture of recent debates is that structuration theory and realism are presented as approaches *in toto*, though they are actually elements of possible approaches. The first is a social ontology (what is the social?) and not a social theory about certain aspects of a specific type of society. That means it has to be employed in the construction of specific theories before we can talk about an approach. The second is a philosophy of science upon which can be formulated different approaches. Here the first step must be to formulate an appropriate social ontology before we

move to the more specific areas of theory. To do so I think it would be fruitful to bring Marx, Bhaskar and Giddens to talk with each other about structure and agency, in order to formulate a critical realist, nonstructuralist social ontology.

But this is not necessarily the same as saying that we are searching for one approach in the narrow sense. Why do we assume that we are looking for a middle ground point of view? Why not two, or more? I think we have to be open-minded towards more approaches argued on the basis of social ontological differentiations, and not restrict our thinking to empirical differentiations as is done in *Approaching Human Geography*. Sciences are characterized internally by a variety of approaches corresponding to ontological levels within the discipline. Giddens differentiation between the study of agency and the study of institutions underlines this point. Perhaps we can not talk about agency and structure as such but have to find a way to operate with agency and structure at ontologically different levels within social science?

Do I have to say that most of these ideas are post-postmodernistic?

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