

MODERN GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT

R. Peet, 1999, Blackwell, 342 pp.

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- + Post-positivist debates dominating human geography during its progressive engagement with social theory
- + philosophical different positions, and in-depth readings of key contributions by geographers within different paradigms
- + critical approach for stimulating debates
- + poststructuralism, reproductive democracy – control of the basic institutions of society, Baudrillard

Chapter 1: Introduction – geography, philosophy, and social theory

- + region, place, landscape, space, environment
- + identity crisis – what geographers do is complex
- + reflexive and social construction of geography

Defining the field

- + Is geography the study of relations between society and natural environment? How society shapes, alters, and increasingly transforms the natural environment? How nature conditions society? How social forces “work up” the people and raw materials into culture?
- + Human activity continually remakes its natural context – nature comes to be socially constructed, in the sense both of social and economic forces remaking

landscapes, and of the intervention of ideas and discourses

- + Social theory swings wildly from natural determinism to social constructionism (socio-natural synthesis is effectively impossible)
- + Disciplinary coherence, coverage, compatibility and competence
- + Difference: Dangerous? Interesting? Vital?

Levels of abstraction

Complex set of interrelationships – investigating empirical particulars and constructing general abstractions

- + Metaphilosophy, philosophy, social theory, theory, and practice – divorced from real geographical phenomena and material practices by mental processes of simplification, generalization, and essentializing
- + Not a pure reasoning, or a kind of inherent ability of the universal mind to see through details into structures, but influenced...by metaphilosophies as cultural and political viewpoints

Metaphilosophy

- + Most general perspectives which guide thinking
- + Link between world views and cultures and thinking organized around theoretical concerns
- + Conduit carrying cultural values into theory, yet it is active too in carrying theoretical and philosophical persuasions and informed thinking into culture

- ✚ Expresses the general aim of thinking at the level of its purpose – what people seek in thought, what they appeal to for justification, the standards of truth or efficacy applied to thinking
- ✚ Attempts at thinking the fundamentals of existence from mystical discovery to postmodern scepticism (disenchantment)

A schema.....

Philosophy

- ✚ An abstract way of thinking which employs logic to organize imaginaries, beliefs, and notions of purpose into formal systems of understanding
- ✚ Human practices are informed by ideas derived originally from experience and organized into coherent patterns employing the results in the endeavour of understanding existence
- ✚ 'logic' and 'rationality' in western/enlightenment/Greek classicism = minds are supposed to have innate rational structures derived from similarity of experience in a world already characterized by order
- ✚ ways of thinking are culturally and socially imposed on the mind rather than merely brought to realisation by socialization
- ✚ no single, universal philosophy, but only historical systems and regional forms
- ✚ social ontologies – basic positions on the structures people employ in making their livelihoods
- ✚ epistemologies – evaluations of the truth and validity of the statements which can be made about reality
- ✚ philosophies are thought to be self-evaluating modes of understanding, which are extremely useful to know

Theory

- + more direct contact with occurrences, events, and practices of lived reality
- + theory is inherently inductive – constructed originally from empirical sources
- + and it is also deductive – from a knowledge of one part, aspect, sequence, or difference, the mind can deduce through logic the probable characteristics of other aspects or even, daringly, entire sequences or structures
- + varying degree of care – formal methods of hypothesis formulation and testing

Social theory

- + between philosophy and theory dealing with social, political, and cultural tendencies and characteristics in real societies
- + derives from criticisms of the idea that the mind has an innate logical structure
- + logics are social and cultural in origin and political in intent
- + logics are influenced by non-logical beliefs and cultural meanings, and by body and emotion as well as mind
- + frustration with just plain old theory, especially empirical-positivist notions of theory, the slow aggregation of inductively derived fragments through observation and measurement of discrete “ facts”
- + people interpret the forces that affect them, and theorists interpret these interpretations in a double hermeneutic

Practice

- + in the production, eternal discussion, and dissemination of ideas, with ideas being representations of real events and practices
- + research discovers the factual, empirical basis of these representations
- + theoretical contemplation elaborates ideas from facts and puts them into systems
- + writing displays these ideas in discursive formats
- + research, thinking, and teaching are political processes, immersed in power relations – ideas are not neutral ‘facts’ but are instrument of persuasion

Geographical thought

- + study of geography as the discipline that has been allocated geographical topics in the existing academic division of labour

Geographical praxis

- + Is it a cliché ‘geography is what geographers do?’
- + making geography through daily praxis
- + teaching and research practices react to the broader context of societal crises, urgencies, and pragmatic requirements
- + political reaction involving utility or critique, accommodation or opposition, to the existing social order
- + making and remaking discipline – external pressure and internal contentions (status, power, money)
- + quest for understanding fight with surrounding groups – specialized discourse: formal statements, rules, what degree of intensity, what is accepted as truthful or valid

- ✚ no neutral assessment either of the structure of social existence or of the truth or even adequacy of theories/epistemologies
- ✚ only political ontologies and political epistemologies

Philosophy of geography

- ✚ in making geography through practice – leading role have histories and philosophies of the discipline
- ✚ system of general ideas on direction and content of geographical work in praxis
- ✚ abstract notions summarizing multiple realization or practical insights and project them into scarcely theorized new directions
- ✚ main themes of practitioners thinking about similar topics
- ✚ philosophy *of a* discipline constantly interacts with philosophy *as a* discipline
- ✚ through empirical and theoretical practice rather than abstract speculation

Philosophy as social theory

- ✚ geographical thought elucidates theoretical frameworks for the organization of data about this world
- ✚ a change in the quality of philosophy of geography – from naturalistic in form and content via ‘mysticism’ to materialist history of real processes, from spiritual contemplation to practical intellectual activity
- ✚ “modern” = post-Enlightenment and European, use rational scientific forms of thinking and expression to organize data
- ✚ theoretical frameworks for the organization of data about the world

- + abstract thought systems often precede fact, ideologically construct it, discursively guide what is constructed as “ fact”
- + ontologies are therefore political ways of understanding the world, while epistemologies only pretend the neutral arbitration of fact over fiction in an effort at disguising not their direct political motives but their social functionality (hence the notion that facts are social constructions)
- + the modern history of geographical thought can only be read politically