

## POSTMODERN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

A preliminary assessment

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*Zusammenfassung:* Postmoderne Geographie des Menschen. Eine vorläufige Bilanz

Der nachfolgende Beitrag versucht eine vorläufige Bilanz des Einflusses des postmodernen Denkansatzes auf die Geographie des Menschen während des vergangenen Jahrzehnts zu geben. Eine einheitliche Theorie der Postmoderne gibt es nicht. Ihre philosophischen Ursprünge können bis ins 19. Jahrhundert zurückverfolgt werden, obwohl der Begriff selbst erst seit den 30er Jahren gebräuchlich wurde. Konzepte der Postmoderne im Sinne von Stil, Epoche und Methode werden geprüft, um das Verständnis für eine höchst schillernde Terminologie zu fördern. Zusammen mit der Bewegung des Dekonstruktivismus hat der Ansatz des postmodernen Denkens zahlreiche philosophischen Grundlagen der Aufklärung und des "modernen" Denkens in Frage gestellt. Im Bereich der Geographie des Menschen können Spuren des postmodernen Denkansatzes in der quantitativen Revolution und im Wiederaufleben der marxistischen Sozialtheorie entdeckt werden. Im Anschluß an zwei frühe Stellungnahmen im Jahre 1986 folgte eine Flut von geographischen Arbeiten postmodernen Charakters, anfangs vor allem in Bereichen der Kulturgeographie, Wirtschaftsgeographie sowie in der Theorie und Philosophie des Faches. Die Ausweitung der Arbeiten auf zahlreiche Themen in der Geographie des Menschen nach 1989 verweist auf das wachsende Verständnis für die Folgen des Postmodernismus. Die wichtigsten Themen in dieser Literatur sind: Probleme der Darstellung, die Politik der Postmoderne, die Grenzen des Individuums und die Rückbesinnung auf die Natur und die Umwelt. Es erübrigt sich zu erwähnen, daß der postmoderne Denkansatz nicht ohne Widerspruch aufgenommen wurde. Doch bis heute haben sich auch die meisten Gegner zumindest kritisch mit dem Postmodernismus auseinandergesetzt. Insgesamt können die Wirkungen des postmodernen Denkens als befreiend angesehen werden; die Zukunft von Forschung und Lehre in unserem Fache wird davon abhängen, wie Geographen auf diese Herausforderung reagieren werden.

*[Human] thought can break with its delusive prehistory only by constantly and actively rehearsing that break.<sup>1)</sup>*

The tidal wave of postmodernity hit human geography with predictable consequences. As in many other disciplines, it engendered intense excitement in a handful of scholars inspired by its provocations. But more generally, it has been met with active hostility from those who perceived their intellectual

authority being threatened; incomprehension on the part of those who (for whatever reason) failed to negotiate its arcane jargon; and the indifference of the majority, who have ignored what they presumably perceived as the latest fad. On the ideological left, postmodernism encountered few friends, since progressives viewed its pluralist (some say neo-conservative) sentiments with suspicion. There were even fewer allies on the right, whose crusade to preserve the established canons of Western culture transformed this same pluralism into the arcane obligations of "political correctness".

Despite the combined armies of antipathy and inertia, postmodernism has flourished. I believe this is because it constitutes the most profound challenge to three hundred years of post-Enlightenment thinking. Postmodern thought holds that rationalism has failed both as an ideal and as a practical guide for social action; and that, henceforward, we must manage without such Enlightenment desiderata as decisive theoretical argument or self-evident truth. Postmodernism is not an overnight sensation; in its current form, it has been echoing around academic corridors for over three decades. Nor is it likely to disappear in the foreseeable future, despite the dismissive edicts of authoritarian academic gurus. Postmodernism is simply something we must get used to.

In this essay, I propose to review the impact of postmodern thought in academic human geography over the period 1984 to 1993. The year 1984 is significant because it was then that JAMESON published what many regard as *the* pivotal English-language article focusing geographers' attention on postmodernity and its implications. Ten years later, JAMESON's essay retains its vitality; but during the same period, human geographical writing has undergone a revolution of sorts. I would like to offer a preliminary assessment of this pivotal decade. It must be *preliminary*, because we remain perforce caught up in the postmodern turn in geographical thinking. In addition, the territory of social and geographical thought continues to be so highly contested that I would not presume to forge any kind of consensual overview of the terrain. In what follows, I shall first recap the terms of the debates in postmodernism; then examine the principal dimensions of a putative

<sup>1)</sup> J. DERRIDA, quoted in NORRIS (1982, p. 127).

postmodern human geography as revealed in the literature of the past decade; and finally, I shall consider some of the consequences of human geography's engagement with the postmodern challenge.

#### *The meanings of postmodernity*

[T]he great lesson of the twentieth century is that all the great truths are false.<sup>2)</sup>

Postmodernity is everywhere, from literature, design and philosophy, to MTV<sup>3)</sup>, ice cream and underwear. This seeming ubiquity only aggravates the problem in grasping its meaning. Postmodern discourse seems capable of instant adaptation in response to context and choice of interlocutors. We can cut to the heart of the matter by identifying three principal constructs in postmodernism: style, epoch and method (DEAR 1986).<sup>4)</sup>

The contemporary explosion of interest in postmodern thought may be traced to the emergence of new styles of literature and literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s (BEST a. KELLNER 1991, HUYSSSEN 1984). Postmodern cultural sensitivities quickly spread to other artistic endeavors, including design, painting and photography. The example of architecture is particularly revealing (JENCKS 1992). Here, the search for the new was associated with a revolt against the formalism and austerity of the modern style epitomized by the unadorned office tower. However, while architecture's departure from modernism was loudly broadcast, the profession's destination remained vague. The burgeoning postmodern architecture was disturbingly divorced from any broad philosophical underpinnings, taking the form of an apparently-random cannibalizing of existing architectural archetypes, and combining them into an ironic collage (or pastiche) of previous styles. Called "memory architecture" by its detractors, postmodernism's obituary was published embarrassingly soon after its birth, testimony to the vacuousness of treating it solely as a matter of aesthetics. In other fields (such as literary theory), the divorce between

substance and philosophy never materialized, and postmodern inquiry flourishes.

The notion of postmodernism as *epoch* is founded in the contention that a "radical break" with past societal trends is underway, and that the sum of present-day changes is sufficiently great to warrant the definition of a separate culture with identifiable historical limits (JAMESON 1984, SMART 1993). The term *postmodernity* tends to be reserved by those wishing to describe the epoch following modernity (e. g. BEST a. KELLNER 1991, GIDDENS 1990). The hypothesis of a postmodern epoch (even in such provisional forms as "post-Fordism", etc.) involves grappling with the fundamental problem of theorizing contemporaneity, i. e. the task of making sense out of an infinity of concurrent societal realities. Any landscape is simultaneously composed of obsolete, current, and emergent artifacts; but how do we begin to codify and understand this variety? And at what point is the accumulated evidence sufficient to announce a radical break with the past? The idea that we are living in "new times" is seductive, but there are no clear answers to these questions. Postmodern culture may yet prove to be an extension of past trends or the barometer of some more catastrophic changes. In any event, the volume and speed of contemporary world adjustments are surely sufficient to caution against subsuming them too readily into existing theories and presuppositions.

The third version of postmodernism is likely the most enduring. Postmodernism as *method* is basically a revolt against the rationality of modernism, a deliberate attack on the "foundational" character of much modernist thought. As HUYSSSEN (1984) warned, there can be little doubt that the classics of modernism are great works (of art), but problems arise: "when their greatness is used as [an] unsurpassable model and appealed to in order to stifle contemporary artistic production" (p. 256). Postmodern philosophers eschew the notion of universal truth and the search for "metanarratives" (i. e. grand theoretical frameworks designed to explain the Meaning of Everything). They especially renounce the authority that implicitly or explicitly bolsters the claim to privilege one theory over another (as in: mine is "good science"/"hard science"; yours is not, hence it is inferior). Such hegemonic claims, postmodernists hold, are ultimately undecidable, and even the attempt to reconcile or resolve the tensions among competing theories should a priori be resisted. At the core of this epistemological standpoint lie the imponderables of language and different subjectivities. Since WITTGENSTEIN, it has been clear that we can

<sup>2)</sup> B.-H. LEVY, quoted in the New York Times, December 13, 1992, p. E-9.

<sup>3)</sup> MTV is Music Television, a cable television service that broadcasts popular music and updates on youth culture (news, fashion, interviews, etc.).

<sup>4)</sup> I realize this is an artificial distinction, since each category impinges on the other. However, it will suffice for purposes of exposition. For alternative taxonomies, see inter alia BEST a. KELLNER 1991, GREGORY 1987, and SMART 1993.

never master the language we employ; its effects always go beyond what we can control. The *deconstruction* movement, which may be viewed as part of the postmodern turn, has demonstrated that the use and intentionality of language is intimately bound up with the different subjectivities that guide our inquiries. Hence, we must inevitably fail in the task of representation (i. e. the "objective" reporting of our research "findings"), and in attempts to reconcile conflicting interpretations. In sum, a postmodern epistemology undermines the modernist belief that theory can mirror reality, and replaces it with a partial, relativistic viewpoint emphasizing the contingent, mediated nature of theory-building. Metatheories and foundational thoughts are rejected in favor of microexplanations and undecidability. More than most, therefore, postmodernists learn to contextualize, to tolerate relativism, and to be conscious always of difference.

The philosophical origins of the postmodern movement have been traced to the nineteenth century, although the term itself began to be employed in the 1930s (SMART 1993). At minimum, its complex genealogy encompasses NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER, the French poststructuralists (including FOUCAULT, DERRIDA, and LYOTARD) and American pragmatists (such as RORTY). It should therefore come as no surprise that we lack a unified theory of the postmodern. Instead, theory becomes a constant process of conversation – a discourse theory – in which meaning and representation are subject to continuous negotiation (CRAIB 1992).

Critics have seized on this relativism to attack postmodernism's credibility (NORRIS 1993). For instance, ELLIS (1989) asserts that deconstruction is "inherently antitheoretical", and that what is needed now is: "the development of some check and control on the indigestible, chaotic flow of critical writing through reflection on what is and what is not in principle worthwhile – that is, through genuine, rather than illusory, theoretical reflection." (p. 159)<sup>5)</sup> Part of the antirelativists' complaint is undoubtedly motivated by a need to preserve the legitimacy of their own scientific and political projects in the face of a babel of burgeoning discourses. The threat to existing hegemonies seems to be especially keenly felt by Marxists (e. g. CALLINICOS 1990), but it also underlies the defense of Western cultural traditions and the rise of the term *political correctness* as an epithet of scorn amongst neo-conservatives.

<sup>5)</sup> ELLIS ignores the fact that these are the very sentiments which led to the original exclusivities of modernism.

Other groups, who initially benefited from postmodernism's antihegemonic stance, have more recently begun to distance themselves from its precepts. The case of feminism is perhaps the most notorious; once empowered as "different" voices, many advocates now claim that postmodernism's ambiguities run counter to a feminist political agenda (NICHOLSON 1990). Other critics have launched a strong defense of the project of modernity, including HABERMAS, or have observed that postmodernism is compromised because it cannot escape from the contradiction that it too is a metanarrative (LAGOPOULOS 1993).

Much of the furor engulfing postmodernism is undoubtedly political in nature, both within the academy as well as society as a whole (GRAFF 1992, NORRIS 1992, 1993). Everywhere, the dispute is about who controls the discourse and, hence, holds power. Critics on the left and the right who bemoan the political passivity or political correctness allegedly inherent in postmodernism are fooling only themselves; because like all theories postmodernism can be enlisted to suit any political purpose. In recognition of the slippery surfaces of theory, many have distinguished between a positive/affirmative and a negative/skeptical perspective on postmodernism. The former allows that a politically progressive agenda is possible within postmodernism; the latter holds that it is inherently, inevitably conservative in orientation (BEST a. KELLNER 1991, ROSENAU 1992). This distinction is encapsulated by FOSTER (1985), who recognized a postmodernism of *resistance* and a postmodernism of *reaction*. It clarifies what I take to be axiomatic: that in our shifting world, postmodern thought has not removed the necessity for political and moral judgements; what it has done is to question the basis for such judgements.

#### *Postmodern geographies*

*Give me a fruitful error any time, full of seeds, bursting with its own corrections. You can keep your sterile truth for yourself.*<sup>6)</sup>

Human geographers took up the postmodern challenge during the mid 1980s. This was partly a consequence of the prominence afforded to *space* in a seminal essay on postmodern culture by JAMESON (1984). One of his most audacious claims was that existing time-space systems of societal organization and perception have been fundamentally altered to accommodate the emergent realms of a global

<sup>6)</sup> VILFREDO PARETO

capitalism; consequently, a new postmodern "hyper-space" has emerged, the time-space coordinates of which we can so far only dimly perceive. Since JAMESON's article was published, a significant roster of postmodern geographical writing has been compiled.

Two of the earliest geographical articles dealing explicitly with postmodernism were published by DEAR (1986) and SOJA (1986). The former dealt with urban planning and the production of a postmodern urbanism; the latter was an exuberant deconstruction of Los Angeles by an unrepentant postmodernist. Both articles appeared in a special issue of the journal *Society and Space* devoted to Los Angeles.<sup>7)</sup> Since 1986, over fifty major articles and an equivalent number of critical commentaries have appeared in prominent geography journals including especially *Society and Space*, but also the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, the *Canadian Geographer*, and the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.<sup>8)</sup>

#### *Postmodern Traces*

With the benefit of hindsight, traces of a postmodern consciousness can, of course, be uncovered in

<sup>7)</sup> It was no accident that much of the initial impetus to a postmodern human geography derived from southern California. This was, after all, the site of one of JAMESON's most provocative postmodern encounters (with the Bonaventure Hotel). In addition, JENCKS, the principal chronicler of the postmodern movement in architecture, was on the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles; the humanities program at the University of California at Irvine (in Orange County) played frequent host to DERIDA, LYOTARD, and other luminaries; and a deliberate attempt was underway to reconceptualize late-twentieth century urbanism under the auspices of the "L. A. School".

<sup>8)</sup> These papers are not identified here, but most are referenced later in the paper and listed in the bibliography. My survey of the literature since 1984 has been confined to English-language sources; I have also deliberately excluded from consideration the vast outpouring of postmodern literature in disciplines other than geography since that date. Both strategies were adopted to contain this review within manageable proportions. One other methodological point is pertinent: I am acutely aware that, in dealing with essays and books according to their dates of publication, I am ignoring the true chronology of conception and writing. Some may regard this as a minor problem because a work must appear in print to achieve its widest impact. On the other hand, this logic skirts the undoubted influence of precirculated drafts, conference presentations, etc. Unfor-

geographical writings prior to 1986.<sup>9)</sup> The principal historical reasons for the absorption of postmodern thought into geography are properly to be found in the resurgence of Marxist social theory in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>10)</sup> It was out of a broadly-based poststructuralist response to the perceived obsolescences of Marxism that impetus was imparted to the postmodern turn. In geography, this trend was instrumental in the renaissance of a more general interest in social theory and in reconnecting the discipline to a broad spectrum of socio-economic and political debates. But let me emphasize that few of the contributors to these developments viewed themselves then, or now, as postmodernists. Of particular consequence were the substantive emphases on the urban question (CASTELLS 1977), and the role of space in economic development and socio-spatial relations (HARVEY 1982, MASSEY 1984). The high level of scholarly activity in these areas rendered them particularly susceptible to innovation and rapid evolution.

It was not long before the neo-Marxist revival fell under scrutiny, and something like a "golden age" of theoretical/philosophical efflorescence occurred in human geographical thought.<sup>11)</sup> For instance, in 1978 GREGORY published his influential *Science, Ideology and Human Geography*, drawing attention in particular to the work of critical theorists such as HABERMAS. In the same year, DEAR and CLARK (1978) began their reappraisal of the theory of the state, with a neo-Marxian emphasis on the structures and language of legitimacy. A humanist geography also developed to counter the Marxian emphasis on structural explanation (LEY and SAMUELS 1978). And, during this period, very deliberate attempts were launched to

fortunately, I know of no straightforward way to overcome this bias.

<sup>9)</sup> GREGORY (1989) provides a succinct and authoritative overview of geography's external connections with political economy, sociology, and anthropology during this period.

<sup>10)</sup> This is not to suggest that there was no relevant history before the Marxist renaissance; quite the contrary. See, for example, KING's (1976) remarkably prescient and perceptive essay assessing the way ahead in post-quantitative economic geography; and GOULD's (1979) caustic retrospective on the decades between 1957 and 1977. Here, I shall focus on postmodernism's principal genealogy rather than an exhaustive disciplinary history.

<sup>11)</sup> A detailed historiography of the truly exceptional period between 1965 (the year in which HAGGETT's *Locational Analyses in Human Geography* was published) and 1986 (the explicit appearance of the postmodern in geography) remains to be written.

investigate the ontological and epistemological bases of geographical knowledge. This was manifest in, for instance, SOJA's (1980) determined efforts to reposition space in the realm of social theory, following the seminal contributions of LEFEBVRE; in OLSSON's (1980) confrontation with the travails of language; and in SAYER's (1974) systematic inquiry on method in the social sciences.

The burgeoning connections between geography and social theory were given concrete expression in 1983, with the appearance of the journal *Society and Space* as part of the *Environment and Planning* series. The first issue included THRIFT's (1983) wide-ranging reformulation of the problematic of time and space (which reflected his earlier work with PRED on time geography), and MCDOWELL's (1983) fundamental paper on the gender division of urban space. Subsequent issues have maintained a steady flow of increasingly self-conscious attempts to link social theory and human geography. The ubiquity of this problematic may be gauged from the title of an influential 1985 collection of essays: *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (GREGORY a. URRY 1985).

The 1986 papers by SOJA and DEAR may thus have crystallized a pervasive turbulence in geography's theoretical discourse and provided a platform for the next stages in the conversation. However, these essays were not so much theoretical departures, but more the culmination of a decade's engagement with the central issues of social theory.

#### *Postmodern Consciousness*

JAMESON's identification of architecture as the "privileged aesthetic" of a postmodern culture made it easy for geographers to adapt his insights to their agenda. Early studies by RELPH (1987) and LEY (1987) drew attention to the built environment and the landscapes of postmodernity. These and other studies were instrumental in provoking an uninterrupted sequence of research on postmodern culture, emphasizing place and place-making, spectacle and carnival, and consumption. Given postmodernism's special emphasis on culture, it was inevitable that cultural geographers would be drawn to it. A pivotal appraisal is provided by JACKSON (1989), (but see also AGNEW a. DUNCAN 1989, COOKE 1988a, COSGROVE a. DANIELS 1988, FREEMAN 1988, LARKHAM 1988, MILLS 1988, SACK 1988, SHIELDS 1989).

Another, independent line of geographical inquiry in the late 1980s centered on the processes of contemporary economic restructuring, particularly the

move toward flexible specialization (what some call flexible accumulation). Economic geographers were attempting to analyze the emergent dynamics of post-Fordist, flexible industrial systems and their concomitant spatial organization. Although few if any of these inquiries were explicitly postmodern in nature, they inevitably intersected with the problematic of periodization, i. e. whether or not a radical break had occurred to signal the arrival of a postmodern society (COOKE 1988b, Gertler 1988, SCHOENBERGER 1988, SCOTT 1988, STORPER a. WALKER 1989).

A third source of fertile intellectual discord concerned the emergent status of social theory in human geography. The validity of a social theoretical approach was rarely at issue; more usually, the debate took the form of sometimes vitriolic exchanges among competing orthodoxies, the details of which need not detain us here (see SAUNDERS a. WILLIAMS 1986, and the subsequent can(n)on fire in volume 5/4 of *Society and Space*). A temporary truce established two broad positions: one coalition favored maintaining the hegemony of their preferred theory (whatever that happened to be); a second advocated a theoretical pluralism that may properly be viewed as a precursor of postmodern sensibilities.

The point that these trends establish is that a postmodern consciousness emerged in human geography not from some orchestrated plot, but instead from a diversity of separate perspectives – including the cultural landscape, emergent economic geographies, and theoretical stand-offs.<sup>12)</sup> Each trend had a life of its own before it intersected with postmodernism, but each (I believe) was irrevocably altered as a consequence of this engagement. By 1988, DEAR was able to argue for the relative coherence of what he styled the "postmodern challenge" to human geography. His plea was premised on the significance of space in postmodern thought and the potential of geography's contribution to a rapidly evolving field of social inquiry.

#### *The Postmodern Wave*

The year 1989 saw the publication of two geography books, each having postmodernism as a cen-

<sup>12)</sup> There undoubtedly were other important trends besides the three I have identified (e. g. the "localities" research initiative in Great Britain). I have not attempted an exhaustive review of all the threads in the postmodern web, merely to establish their critical contributory presence prior to postmodernism's appearance.

tral theme. Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*: the reassertion of space in critical social theory was a celebration of postmodernism and its challenges; but HARVEY's *The Condition of Postmodernity*: an inquiry into the origins of cultural change was an openly hostile critique of postmodernism that attempted to subsume contemporary events within the explanatory rubric of Marxism. A year later, COOKE's *Back to the Future: modernity, postmodernity and locality* appeared – a perspective of the “localities” project in Great Britain that was sympathetic to the claims of postmodernism. Whatever their respective merits, these books and their authors concentrated a discipline's attention on the postmodern question.<sup>13</sup> But in truth, the wave had already gathered an unstoppable momentum. The roster of publications in 1989 and subsequent years reveals a significant postmodern consciousness in the three topical areas I previously identified:

1) *cultural landscapes and place-making*, with an increasing emphasis on the *urban* (ANDERSON a. GALE 1992, BEAUREGARD 1989, DEAR 1989, DUNCAN 1990, GLENNIE a. THRIFT 1992, HOPKINS 1990, ROBINS 1991, SHIELDS 1989, SHORT 1989, ZUKIN 1991, and the essays in BARNES a. DUNCAN 1992, SORKIN 1992, and WOLCH a. DEAR 1989);

2) *economic landscapes of post-Fordism and flexible specialization*, with particular interest in *global-local connections* and the *spatial division of labor* (BARNES a. CURRY 1992, DUNFORD 1990, GERTLER 1988, LEBORGNE a. LIPIETZ 1988, SAYER a. WALKER 1992, SCHOENBERGER 1988, SCOTT 1988, SLATER 1992 a 1992 b, STORPER a. WALKER 1989, WEBBER 1991); and

3) continuing *philosophical and theoretical disputes*, especially those relating to *space* and the problems of *language* (CURRY 1992, DOEL 1992, FOLCH-SERRA 1989, HANNAH a. STROHMAYER 1991, HARRIS 1991, JONES et al. 1993, MILROY 1989, PEET a. THRIFT 1988, PHILO 1992, PILE 1990, SCHATZKI 1991, SCOTT a. SIMPSON-HOUSLEY 1989, SMITH 1989).

There was also an explosion of interest in the application of postmodernism to other topical areas, representing a deepening appreciation of the extent of postmodern's reach and relevance.<sup>14</sup> In summary

<sup>13</sup> My own critical assessments of SOJA and HARVEY are to be found in DEAR (1990, 1991a, 1991b). Other extended commentaries are to be found in DEUTSCHE (1991), MASSEY (1991) and RELPH (1991).

<sup>14</sup> The rush of publications in 1992 was partly due to DOEL and MATLESS who assembled two remarkable issues of *Society and Space* (volumes 10/1 and 10/2) devoted entirely to the postmodern question.

form, the many themes that became manifest during the period 1989–93 may be grouped under four broad rubrics:

4) *problems of representation in geographical/ethnographic writing* (BARNES a. DUNCAN 1992, CRANG 1992, JACKSON 1991, MARCUS 1992, MATLESS 1992a, KATZ 1992, KEITH 1992, REICHERT 1992), in *cartography* (HARLEY 1989, PICKLES 1992, WOOD 1992), and in *art* (BONNETT 1992, DANIELS 1992);

5) the *politics of postmodernity*, including both historical and contemporary (DALBY 1991, DRIVER 1992, GRAHAM 1992, HEPPLE 1992, O'TUATHAIL 1992, PILE a. ROSE 1992), *feminist geography's* discontentment with postmodernism (BONDI a. DOMOSH 1992, CHRISTOPHERSON 1989, DOMOSH 1991, PRATT 1992), *orientalism and postcolonialism* (DRIVER 1992, GREGORY 1991), and the *law* and critical legal studies (see the special issues of *Urban Geography* (1990) edited by BLOMLEY a. CLARK);

6) an emphasis on the *construction of the individual and the boundaries of self*, including *human psychology and sexuality* (respectively BISHOP 1992, HOGGET 1992, GELTMAKER 1992, MOOS 1989, KNOPP 1992, VALENTINE 1993); and

7) a reassertion of *nature and the environmental question* (BORDESSA 1993, EMEL 1991, FITZSIMMONS 1989, MATLESS 1991, 1992a, 1992b), which has taken many forms, including a fresh look at the relationships between *place and health* (GESLER 1993, KEARNS 1993).

By 1991, postmodernism received an extended treatment in a textbook on geographical thought (CLOKE et al. 1991), and became part of the standard fare in others (e. g. JOHNSTON 1991, LIVINGSTONE 1992, UNWIN 1992). Matters were further helped by the publication of two important works in English translation (LEFEBVRE 1991, WERLEN 1993). The availability of LEFEBVRE's *La Production de l'Espace* was especially welcome since, in my judgement at least, a clear postmodern consciousness pervades this influential work (DEAR 1993).

In pedagogic terms, too, postmodernism's emphases on difference and diversity have profound implications (GRAFF 1992).<sup>15</sup> The presences and absences in the typical curriculum confirm that there has been no single canon of geographical thought. Instead, there is merely a series of unresolved, often unacknowledged, conflicts that are usually kept out of the classroom. In private, faculty customarily adopt a “field-coverage” approach to the subject, believing

<sup>15</sup> My argument in this paragraph closely follows that in GRAFF (1987).

that innovation and contradiction can least messily be addressed by adding one more unit to the curriculum. The implicit assumption is that so long as students are exposed to the curricular grid, the subject will teach itself; any synthesis or contradiction will somehow be resolved in the mind of the student (even though teachers themselves have not assailed these connections). It seems more likely however that a disabling incoherence will ensue. But wisdom will not derive from the imposition of some false consensus on the "basics" of the geographical canon. A much more defensible alternative is to *teach the differences* in the subject; i. e. to apply a postmodern consciousness to our pedagogy as well as our research. A recent attempt to reconcile cultural and social geography may be regarded as a step in this direction (PHILO 1991).

A number of institutional responses in the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected a growing awareness of the dissolution of disciplinary barriers in teaching and research. For instance, a Center for Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture was set up in 1986 at Rutgers University, since when geographers have played an important role in a broadly-based social science and humanities research program. In 1989, at the University of Kentucky, a Committee on Social Theory was founded in order to encourage campus-wide collaboration, again with a strong organizational base in geography. And an interdisciplinary master's degree in Society and Space admitted its first students in 1992 at the University of Bristol in England, based in the Department of Geography and the School of Advanced Urban Studies.

#### *Postmodern Contentions*

The introduction of postmodernism into human geography was not without dissent. The most common complaints echo those already current in the intellectual marketplace: that postmodernism's extreme relativism renders it politically incoherent, and hence useless as a guide for social action; that it is (ironically) just one more metanarrative; and that the project of modernity is still relevant even though there is little agreement about exactly which pieces are worth salvaging. I have also already noted feminism's divergent path.

At a superficial though certainly not trivial level, many geographer critics have simply lost patience with the promiscuous way in which the term has been bandied about; if the term could be applied to everything, then it probably meant nothing and was simply not worth the effort. Others were upset that they and

their work were invoked to support a movement for which they had no sympathy.<sup>16)</sup> In one such case, PRED (1992) angrily distanced himself with these words: "I have never chosen to label myself as "postmodern". . . . I regard "postmodern" as an inaccurate, uncritical, deceptive, and thereby politically dangerous "epochal" labeling of the contemporary world . . . [which is] best depicted as modernity magnified, as modernity accentuated and sped up, as *hypermodern*, not *postmodern*" (p. 305). Behind these sentiments there lies an unequivocal rejection of the postmodern if not everything that postmodernism represents, even though PRED's work is, I believe, clearly implicated in the rise of postmodernism in geography.

The most sustained rejection of the postmodern turn in geography is undoubtedly that of HARVEY (1989). The Condition of Postmodernity is perhaps best regarded as a defense of Marxism in light of the postmodern assault. Given HARVEY's unassailable reputation within and beyond the discipline, it was to be expected that the book would be widely read and that the repudiation it contained would deal a mortal blow. But, while broadly acknowledged, the book has done little to stall the production of postmodern geographical scholarship, which (as we have seen) increased dramatically in the intervening years. The fact that the book met with some stinging rebuttals may have muted its influence within the discipline (e. g. DEAR 1991a, MASSEY 1991). In addition, HARVEY's orthodoxy might have posed problems for fellow Marxists who had begun the long and arduous task of rewriting their social theory to account for the social conditions of postmodernity.<sup>17)</sup>

A different critical geographical literature is less concerned with outright rejection of postmodernism and more directed toward a constructive engagement with its problematic. Most commonly, this work has explored the genealogy of postmodern thought, its broad links with the modern era, and the persistence of modernist themes in the present discourse (CURRY 1991, STROHMAYER a. HANNAH 1992). Elsewhere,

<sup>16)</sup> This is likely to be true of some of the authors I have cited in this paper. So let me repeat my earlier caveat: not all authors referred to in my discussion will see themselves or their work as implicated in the postmodern turn. However, while I have no desire to foist an unwanted label on anyone, I will insist on a connection between their works and the historiography of this essay.

<sup>17)</sup> See, for example, the special issue of *Antipode* 1989, especially the essays by CLARK and WALKER.

GRAHAM (1992) has perceptively examined the consequences of postmodernism for a progressive politics. And, in a much-needed corollary, postmodern thought has invigorated an effort to define the parameters of modernity itself (e. g. WARD a. ZUNZ 1992, see also GIDDENS 1990). Finally, some geographers have already joined the push to go beyond the terms of the current debates (PILE a. ROSE 1992, and especially THRIFT 1989, 1991, 1993; see also BORGMANN 1992).

#### *Postmodern consequences*

*When we discover that we have in this world no rock or earth to stand and walk upon, but only shifting sea and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity, but to learn to sail.*<sup>18)</sup>

Whether or not we approve or are even aware of it, the postmodern wave has already broken over geography. Some have chosen to ride the wave; others have ducked under, hoping it will pass. Enough time has gone by that we can begin to draw up a balance sheet on the postmodern movement. On the plus side, postmodernity has *enfranchised and empowered* those outside the traditional centers of scholastic authority (especially those beyond the so-called "hard" sciences); *difference* has been legitimized, no matter what its source (e. g. gender, sexual preference, race and ethnicity); and as a consequence, the *hegemony* of existing power centers has been emphatically undermined. Postmodernity, in a word, has been *liberating*. On the negative side, many rue the *loss of rationality*, especially as a basis for individual and collective action; they object to the *cacophony of voices* now crying out to be heard; and have attacked what they see as the essential *conservatism* of a philosophy which, if it espouses anything at all, seems to embrace an open-ended pluralism.

I think it important to emphasize that one does not have to *be* a postmodernist to engage the challenge of postmodern thought. Simply stated, we live in an era of postmodern consciousness; there is no choice in this matter, unless we are prepared to declare in favor of ignorance or the status quo. I believe that a revolution of sorts is occurring in geographical thinking. In less than ten years since 1984, we have witnessed:

a) a truly unprecedented increase in quality scholarship devoted to the relationship between space and society;

b) a reassertion of the significance and role of space in social theory and social process;

c) an effective reintegration of human geography with mainstream social science and philosophy;

d) the establishment of theory and philosophy as the *sine qua non* for the discipline's identity and survival;

e) a new appreciation of diversity and difference, and a consequent diversification of theoretical and empirical interests; and

f) a self-conscious questioning of the relationship between geographical knowledge and social action.

Some or all of these events may have occurred without the advent of postmodernism; but I doubt it, at least not with the same intensity and consequences.

Looking ahead, I am both optimistic and pessimistic. In one respect, ELLIS (1989) was correct in his critique of deconstructionism: that it appealed not because it was a radical departure from entrenched attitudes, but because it fitted the already prevailing climate of intellectual pluralism and lent that climate a new legitimacy. Yet ELLIS found himself unable to live with the consequent "chaotic flow" of critical writing, and pleaded for a return to "standards" of intelligent criticism. This is easier said than done. Postmodernism is exactly about standards, concomitant choices, and the exercise of power. Postmodernism places the construction of meaning at the core of geography's problematic. The key issue here is authority; and postmodernism has served notice on all those who seek to assert or preserve their authority in the academic and everyday world. And yet I understand that geographers, like everyone else, cling tenaciously to their beliefs. Knowledge is, after all, power, and we are all loathe to relinquish the basis for our claims to legitimacy. But is a critical openness too much to ask for? Since comparison, analogy, and metaphor are some of the principal means by which human knowledge is advanced, it would indeed be an unusual science that refused to look tolerantly beyond its traditional preserve, or be discomfited if others cast a critical eye in its direction.

Irrespective of my personal outlook, I am convinced that what happens next will determine geography's future, both in terms of its self-identification and self-definition, as well as its relationship with other disciplines. To ignore the postmodern challenge is to risk disengaging geography once again from the mainstream. To accept it is to encourage new ways of seeing, to relish participating at the cutting edge of social and philosophical inquiry, to convince our peers of the significance of space in contemporary social thought and social process, and to help forge a new politics for the twenty-first century. If we have learned nothing else from the past decade, post-

<sup>18)</sup> WHITE (1985, p. 95)

modernism has taught us that geography has to remain *totally engaged* at all levels (in teaching, research, policymaking, and public discourse) if it is to survive, and to survive in a socially useful way.

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