

# THE NATURE AND MUTUAL COMPLEMENTARITY OF HUMANISM AND POSITIVISM IN GEOGRAPHY

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In the recent decade there has been emerging criticism regarding the suitability of the positivistic philosophy to the understanding of human geographical phenomena. One line of criticism has advocated the adoption of an entirely different approach: an alternative humanistic philosophy. Debate between the approaches has contributed to the neglect of the possibility for a constructive reduction of the gap between them. In an effort to close this gap, the purpose of this article is to review the main ideas of the humanistic approach, the criticism raised against it, and to discuss the mutually potential relevance of the positivistic and of the humanistic approaches, emphasizing their mutual complementarity.

## The Humanistic Alternative in Geography

Although it is possible to trace the origins of humanism in geography to Carl Sauer's "The Morphology of Landscape", (Relph,

1970, p.195), it was only in the recent decade that geographers have begun to realize and advocate some of its concepts. The rise of this new philosophical school, which by no means can yet be considered as a new paradigm in geography (Talarchek, 1977) is attributed primarily to the growing dissatisfaction with the positivistic, physical science oriented, philosophical approach. (Zelinski, 1975; King, 1976). Positivism has viewed its main goal as one of theory-building, with these theories explaining how phenomena in the real world actually occur and behave. Based on sets of assumptions about these phenomena "laws" are hypothesized, and the explanations offered are conditional and subject to verification. In accounting for empirically observed regularity or set of associations the procedure of positivistic science seeks to establish a system of relationships for the observations and to arrive at an adequate explanation of the recorded data. Upon verification, the theory becomes established and should be as determinate as possible, i.e. the variables account for all variation in the observed phenomenon (Chisholm, 1975, pp. 124, 147).

The main criticism of positivism was directed against the notion of objective space that underlies positivistic spatial geography. This notion, in general, has tended to rather simplify

and abstract the universe, and to view man as perceiving the world through a single objective set of lenses. Consequently, man has been thought to universally perceive a common objective world whose properties are only spatial. It was the desire of geographers to achieve scientific precision which necessitated focusing on spatial properties of the universe and sacrificing a more comprehensive understanding of man. (Buttimer, 1974, p. 21).

The universal validity, and the objectivity of objective space - anchored theories of human spatial behavior have been seriously questioned (Zelinsky, 1975, pp. 132-133). Critiques of the concept of objectivity have argued that perception of the world has not been permitted to variations conditioned by personality differences and of psychological backgrounds, nor according to varying environmental characteristics (Relph, 1976, Buttimer, 1974, pp. 17-23). Consideration of these factors, the concept that there exists only one true objective space becomes a misconception because of the plurality of worlds and contexts of geographic facts. (Entrikin, 1976, p.623, Ley, 1977, p.9). In other words, positivist geographers have been in fact imposing their own values and conceptual frameworks to explain human behavior while neglecting the meanings of people and places within this context.

The dissatisfaction with the positivistic-spatial geography has led geographers to challenge the dictatorship of positivistic scientific thought. It is primarily through the works of Tuan (1974, 1976), Buttimer (1974, 1976), Relph (1970, 1976), Guelke (1974), and Walmsley (1974) that the European phenomenological philosophy was introduced as a possible alternative for explaining spatial human behavior.

The phenomenological method is a procedure for describing the everyday world of man's immediate experience. It is radically different from positivism in that it is not a method of analyzing or explaining an objective and rational world through the development of prior hypotheses and theories. The phenomenological method rejects, therefore, the approaches of a mechanistic science and the search for law. Rather, in any act of perception of phenomena, there is not simply a perceived object or fact, but an entire thematic field or structure consisting of all possible intentions and meanings and former experience associated with that fact, all of which do not lend themselves to scientific laws (Walmsley, 1974).

A brief review of the various phenomenological contributions in geography reveals some of the key concepts of this philosophy. Most writers tend to emphasize the idea of the intentionality of

human behavior. Human beings are viewed as having sets of goals, and their actions are characterized by their intentions toward achieving these goals. Human intentions, in turn, are determined by individual sets of aspirations, symbols, and values. Consequently, the range of goals is much wider than the profit-reward maximization or effort-cost minimization dichotomy which is a characteristic of positivist spatial geography and expresses the positivists' values. Furthermore, actions taken by individuals must be conceived within their specific situations, that is, the awareness of the human being to, and his personal experience with, current and historical environmental and societal contexts of his activities. The sum total of his perception of the world he lives within is therefore a crucial element in understanding his actions and his involvement in it. Any research attempt in this direction must consequently consider the individual's self-reflection, and take into account the different meanings attached to different essences by different individuals.

Given this "realistic" view of man within his milieu, phenomenologist geographers find it necessary to put aside theories and models about man and phenomena. They advocate an analysis of human perception of particular phenomenon without making pre-

suppositions about it, except that it is perceived differently by different individuals. Consequently, the number of subjective worlds influencing individual human behavior is determined by the number of attitudes and intentions of individuals. Therefore, when studying human spatial behavior, the phenomenologist geographer would first investigate the different "realistic" worlds rather than start, as the positivist would, with simplified assumptions about them. (Relph, 1970, pp. 194-195). He avoids the positivist imposition of the researcher's own concepts and values in his attempt to understand human behavior. This is basic and crucial to the differences between the positivists and the phenomenologists.

Several areas of criticism have recently been raised concerning the phenomenological approach in geography. The first relates to individual thoughts. In order to understand one's perception of, and attitude toward, a phenomenon, it is necessary to reconstruct one's thoughts about it. This involves two problems. The first is that the private nature of individual thoughts makes them, at least partly, inaccessible to an outsider. The second problem is that even if they were to be made public, individuals encounter difficulties in reconstructing their own

thoughts regarding particular contemporary issues, let alone an untemporaneous researcher attempting to reconstruct a subject's thoughts regarding past events. The researcher may only claim to reconstruct what the subject's thoughts might or should have been in a given situation. (Watts and Watts, 1978, pp 125-126). In so doing, the researcher's own thoughts are being interjected, and it is difficult to separate them from those of the investigated subject. It is often impossible for a social scientist to totally neutralize his own values when explaining behavior of others.

The second criticism relates to intentions. An individual's behavior is not independent of the behavior of others in a social environment. Similar as well as conflicting intentions exist, both of which often make full attainment difficult (Watts and Watts, 1978, p. 126). Individuals approach this conditional situation in daily life with the possibility of personal value compromise. Their perceptions, then, of a problem or phenomenon which originally may have been quite different, become less polarized. Consequently, although a single objective world is not implied, there does emerge a more common view of the environment and the world than is implied from Relph's statement that "there are as many worlds as there are individuals and the attitudes

which they can assume." (Relph, 1970, 1974). With this in mind, King has criticized phenomenologists for their emphasis on individual self-reflection. This notion, however important, is not useful to understand, therefore plan the solutions for many social problems because these solutions demand group decision. By introducing "self-reflection" it becomes difficult to balance "the competing claims and aspirations that inevitably are involved". (King, 1976, p. 305, Talarchek, 1977, p.22).

Another, rather methodological, criticism of the phenomenological approach in geography was raised by Talarchek. Phenomenology, he argues, has failed to develop any coherent methodology; whatever does exist is vague and unstandardized, lacks criteria of precision, and therefore unpractical in its approach regarding prediction. Furthermore, a mechanistic adoption of the phenomenological approach would necessitate the abandonment of all substantial achievements reached thus far by geographers during the 1960's scientific revolution to the loss of the discipline's expertise, particular viewpoint, and position among social sciences. (Talarchek, 1977, pp. 19-22).

#### Humanism-Positivism Complementarity in Geography

In fact both phenomenologist and humanist geographers have



become aware of some of the difficulties involved with their approaches, and tend to retreat from taking extreme positions. One critical issue concerns the notion of "plurality of worlds". There has emerged the contention that some degree of common view regarding phenomena is inevitably shared by individuals. Thus Walmsley has referred to the notion that "the same structure of being underlies all relationships" (Walmsley, 1974, p. 101). Guelke has raised the proposition of "rational thinking" in which different individuals understand a certain situation in a similar way due to their adoption of a common rational theory of this situation (Guelke, 1974, p. 199); Relph has contended that individuals share some "consensual view" of the world because they are part of the same "real world" from which their experience, and therefore perceptions are taken (Relph, 1970, p. 196). Similarly, Hagerstrand, though not strictly a phenomenologist, has spoken about a "twilight zone" between aggregate and individual behavior (Hagerstrand, 1970, p. 9). Thus, humanistic geographers have not totally denied the possibility of approaching some generalizations concerning human perception of phenomena. However, they regard their main role as regaining prescientific and preabstract awareness of the world and environment (Entrikin, 1976, p. 625; Buttner, 1974, p. 25), which

would make such generalizations more representative of reality.

Another issue over which humanist geographers have tended to soften their extreme position concerns methodology. Lack of agreement on whether phenomenology applies for all, or only certain aspects of geography, has raised the problem of the appropriate method for geographic phenomenological studies. This has brought phenomenologist geographers to adapt their approach, and attempt to reduce its polarization from that of the positivist. Representative of this trend is perhaps Buttimer's statement that "it is in the spirit of phenomenological purpose, then, rather than in the practice of phenomenological procedures, that one finds direction". (Buttimer, 1976, p. 280).

It appears, therefore, that the gap between the phenomenological or humanistic, and that of the positivistic approach should not be perceived as being so great. Some humanistic geographers have even maintained that in various degrees both approaches are relevant to one another. Thus, Tuan has regarded positivistic and humanistic geography as two edges of a continuum, expressing either the tendency toward abstraction of human phenomena, or degrees of interpreting human freedom (i.e. intentionality) in making choices. In neither case can the total explanation of human behavior be

of the phenomenological purpose". These forces may be treated as factors and we may operationalize them into explanatory variables employing customary analytical techniques. This would lead to a more penetrating understanding of the problems of human geography within particular subsystems. Space, spatial organization, human intentionality and experience, and environmental settings operate together to explain human environmental behavior rather than that of spatial behavior which considers only the first two forces.

Recently Gregory (1978) addressed himself to alternatives to the positivistic mode of explanation in geography, and suggests a reflexive explanation which is very similar to that suggested approach. Through the method of the "hermeneutic circle" which demonstrates how one frame of reference is mediated by another, he reveals that "theories which are external to the life-world under investigation" are "legitimate prejudices which furnish the necessary conditions for any understanding: they must not be bracketed." He suggests that there must be a dialogue between external (positivist) and internal (humanist) codifications of phenomena under study, the latter a property of human investigation presently excluded by positivism.

### Conclusions

Geography, as other social sciences, has been characterized by topical and methodological dichotomies which at times served to jeopardize its position among the sciences. The gap between regional and systematic geography resulted in the isolation of geography from other sciences, and led to its disrepute in the 30's and 40's. Complete adoption of the phenomenological approach could cause similar results. However, such a consequence also threatens positivistic geography because of its spatial-geometrical sterility. The suggested merger between positivism and humanism is capable of improving geography's ability to explain human spatial behavior within the social sciences to which it belongs, but within which it is not yet fully incorporated.

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