

Geography matters!

A reader

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PART 1

Introduction Geography matters

DOREEN MASSEY

Insofar as any sensible distinction can be made between the various social science disciplines, 'human geography' has traditionally been distinguished by its concern with three relationships. First, there is the relationship between the social and the spatial: between society and social processes on the one hand and the fact and form of the spatial organization of both of those things on the other. Second, there is the relationship between the social and the natural, between society and 'the environment'. Third, there is a concern, which geography shares in particular with history, with the relationship between different elements – economy, social structure, politics, and so forth. While the 'substance' disciplines of the social sciences (economics, sociology, politics) tend to focus on particular parts of society, however difficult these are to distinguish and define, human geography's concern with 'place', with why different localities come to be as they are, has often led it to the study of how those different elements come together in particular spaces to form the complex mosaic which is the geography of society.

The way in which each of these relationships has been conceptualized has varied widely, and often quite dramatically, even in the recent history of the discipline. All have had their extreme versions. The most absolute of environmental determinists saw human character and social organization as a fairly direct and unmediated product of the physical (natural) environment. Some of the 'models of spatial interaction' in the era of the quantitative nineteen-sixties posited a realm of 'the spatial' virtually as substantive as the economic is for economists. There have been studies in which the 'synthesis of elements' (after which regional geography supposedly strove) amounted to little more than chapters which began with geology and gradually moved 'upwards' to politics and culture, with little attempt at interlinkage let alone theorization. But the fact that the answers have so often been wrong does not mean that the questions which were being addressed were not significant. Indeed, what we want to argue in this book is that these questions, concern for these relationships, are of great importance, not just for 'human geography' but for the social sciences as a whole, and for what those social sciences are all about – understanding, and changing, society.

It is our intention here to argue for particular interpretations of each of

these relationships. Much of the debate within social science in the sixties and seventies was in fact concerned, if only implicitly, with these issues. Certainly, the debates had implications for social science's attitude to each of the relationships highlighted here. What we want to do now is to make those relationships explicit, and then to argue that on each front the debate needs to be pushed forward another step. The interpretations which we argue for here are intended to do just that. They enable both 'the spatial' and 'the natural' to regain a significance, which they had previously lost, within the social sciences as a whole. And the concern for place, and hence for specificity and uniqueness, has its parallels, and hence also its implications, in some of the central methodological debates in the social sciences today.

The social and the spatial

One of the classic images of human geography, perhaps today more amongst those outside it than those within, is its concern for the region, the area, the locality, call it what you will. Most of the editors of and contributors to this book were educated in a school-geography which divided itself up into courses on particular regions. This was frequently paralleled by a 'systematic geography' in which the spatial organization of different elements (population, industry, disease) was studied across a set of regions. But it was regional geography which was the central focus. And in that regional geography the concern with space was bound up with a recognition of uniqueness and specificity. Each place was different, and the aim was to put together the elements in such a way that each configuration could be understood. The problem with that project was not its aim. Indeed we are going to argue here that that aim should once again be far more prominent on our agenda. The problem was its execution. Too often it degenerated into an essentially descriptive and untheorized collection of facts. It was this period that gave geography its name as the discipline where you learned lists of products.

The intellectual weakness of this tradition by the middle of the twentieth century laid human geography open to the wave of super-positivism and the mania for quantification which swept all the social sciences in the nineteen-sixties. Geography was to become 'scientific', in the strictly positivist sense. The apogee of this attempt was to be found in the school of 'spatial analysis'. Here mathematical models were built of 'spatial interactions', theories and general laws were constructed out of empirical generalizations from vast data-sets, and everything that was conceivably quantifiable was quantified. In the process much was lost. Most obviously, things which would not submit so easily to quantification disappeared from view. In parallel fashion 'space' itself was reduced to a concern with distance; the interest in particularity and uniqueness was replaced by a search for spatial regularities. But the other thing that was lost was geography's own distinctiveness. It had lost its old distinctive focus – the synthesis of elements within the individuality of a particular region. And its methods had converged with those of the other

sciences. Geography might have, in the terms of the sixties, made itself into a science. The question was: a science of what?

The answer given was: a science of the spatial. The models of spatial interaction posited, either implicitly or explicitly, the notion of 'purely spatial processes'. 'Spatial effects' (the geographical distribution of one thing) were deemed to be explicable by 'spatial causes' (the geographical distribution of another). During this period human geography carved out for itself a new distinctiveness by defining a new object of study – the realm of the spatial. There were spatial laws and spatial processes, spatial causes and spatial relationships. Nor was this an argument whose implications were confined to the intellectual or the academic. It was an important element in the debate over the causes of inner-city decline, and over the impact of regional policy.

In terms of the relation between the social and the spatial, this was the period of perhaps the greatest conceptual separation. Geography at this time, or at least the dominant school of geographical thought, had separated off for itself a realm of the spatial, self-containedly including, in this conception, both cause and effect. It needed little input from the other social science disciplines. For their part the other disciplines forgot about space altogether.

It could not last. In the nineteen-seventies, again along with the other social sciences, a radical critique was launched in human geography of the dominant school of the sixties. In geography it took a particular form. Above all it was argued – and it now seems so obvious – that there is not and cannot be a separate realm of 'the spatial'. There are no such things as spatial processes without social content, no such things as purely spatial causes, spatial laws, interactions or relationships. What was really being referred to, it was argued, was the spatial form of social causes, laws, interactions and relationships. 'The spatial', it was pronounced, and quite correctly, 'does not exist as a separate realm. Space is a social construct.'

Once again, this had wider ramifications than the simply academic, and indeed it was most frequently in debates about policy issues that the methodological questions came most clearly to a head. The causes of spatial patterns, such as inner-city decline and the problems of peripheral regions, could not be sought simply in other spatial patterns, it was argued; the causes had to be found in wider changes going on in British economy and society as a whole.

One of the immediate implications of this argument was that, in order to explain their chosen object of study, geographers now had to go outside what had previously been conceived of as the boundaries of their discipline. In order to understand the geography of industry it was necessary to learn economics and industrial sociology. To understand spatial differentiation in housing it was necessary to appreciate the mechanisms (economic, sociological, political) underlying the operation of the housing market. It was recognized, in other words, that in order to understand 'geography' it was necessary to understand society.

The position of this book is to argue that the critique was both correct and

important. Indeed, it seems difficult in retrospect to do otherwise. But we also want to argue that this is not the end of the debate.

The position reached in the argument so far is inadequate in a number of related respects. Essentially, only one half of the argument had been followed through. It had been agreed that the spatial is a social construct. But the corollary, that social processes necessarily take place over space, had not been taken on board. While geographers struggled to learn other disciplines and apply their knowledge to the understanding of spatial distributions, the other disciplines continued to function, by and large, as though the world operated, and society existed, on the head of a pin, in a spaceless, geographically undifferentiated world. In terms of the academic disciplinary division of labour, this left geographers simply mapping the outcomes of processes studied in other disciplines; the cartographer of the social sciences. And much of the 'radical geography' of the period was indeed of the 'mapping poverty' variety. But this unsatisfactory division of labour reflected a far more important problem at the level of conceptualisation. For 'space' was seen as only an outcome; geographical distributions as only the *results* of social processes.

But there is more to it than that. Spatial distributions and geographical differentiation may be the result of social processes, but they also affect how those processes work. 'The spatial' is not just an outcome; it is also part of the explanation. It is not just important for geographers to recognize the social causes of the spatial configurations that they study; it is also important for those in other social sciences to take on board the fact that the processes they study are constructed, reproduced and changed in a way which necessarily involves distance, movement and spatial differentiation.

Two questions arise immediately from this formulation. First, what does it mean to say that space has effects? One thing it does *not* mean is that 'space itself', or particular spatial forms, themselves have effects. That would simply be to reproduce the mistakes of the sixties and to posit a notion of the purely spatial. To take an example: it is frequently argued these days that what is emerging as industry's new spatial pattern in the UK will pose insuperable problems for trade union organizers. It is a pattern of relatively isolated factories, often in small towns, often with one plant dominating a whole labour market. Contrasts are drawn with the industrially mixed large labour markets and socially rich contexts of the cities, where trades councils and militancy have frequently flourished. With foreboding (if you are in favour of active trade union organization), people point to the paternalistic relations, lack of militancy, and the frequent common front adopted by workers and owner-managers in the small and isolated labour markets which have so often in the past typified, for instance, the old textile industry. Spatial form seems to 'explain' the difference between the two: city versus isolated labour market. But it does not. It is only necessary to think of the colliery villages of the old coalfields, equally small labour markets, equally dominated by a single

employer, for the argument to fall. For the colliery villages on numbers of occasions have been centres of radicalism and militancy. So indeed have the cotton towns, in their day, been hotbeds of radicalism. It is not spatial form in itself (nor distance, nor movement) that has effects, but the spatial form of particular and specified social processes and social relationships. The social character of both capital and labour has been vastly different in the textile towns and the colliery villages and in both it has changed over time. In both, spatial form has indeed been important in terms of trade union organization and militancy (or lack of it) but it has been a spatial form of different social relationships (with different social content) and as such its influence has been different.

The second question is what, anyway, do we mean by 'space'? As we have already seen, the answer has varied over time. The 'old regional geography' may have had its disadvantages but at least it did retain within its meaning of 'the spatial' a notion of 'place', attention to the 'natural' world, and an appreciation of richness and specificity. One of the worst results of the schools of quantification and spatial analysis was their reduction of all this to the simple (but quantifiable) notion of distance. Space became reduced to a dimension. The arguments of the seventies, by reducing the importance of the spatial, downplayed also any explicit debate about its content. In our view, the full meaning of the term 'spatial' includes a whole range of aspects of the social world. It includes distance, and differences in the measurement, connotations and appreciation of distance. It includes movement. It includes geographical differentiation, the notion of place and specificity, and of differences between places. And it includes the symbolism and meaning which in different societies, and in different parts of given societies, attach to all of these things.

All these aspects of 'the spatial' are important in the construction, functioning, reproduction and change of societies as a whole and of elements of society. *Distance* and separation are regularly used by companies to establish degrees of monopoly control, whether it be over markets (the corner shop being the classic – though possibly least important – example) or over workers (the great advantage for capital of those colliery and textile villages was that, short of migration, workers had no alternative place to sell their labour). *Movement*, and more generally locational flexibility, has become in recent years a major weapon used by capital against labour. Threats to close and move elsewhere have become an almost automatic response of big firms faced with resistance from labour. And in times of recession and shortage of jobs it is a powerful threat. More generally, the search after cheaper labour in recent decades has precisely involved spatial movement, whether it be internationally (with the building of a new international division of labour) or intranationally, with the decentralization of production to 'the regions' of Britain in the sixties and seventies. In both cases spatial restructuring was integral to the maintenance of profitability. A sense of *place*, a commitment

to location and to established community, can be a strong element of people's resistance to planners' plans. Notions of place and territory are fundamental elements of state politics. And the *symbolism* of space and place, which varies both between societies and within them, from the landscapes of Aboriginal Dreamtime to 'prime sites' and 'prestige locations' for bank headquarters, to the Lincoln Memorial and the Cenotaph, in all these forms is integral to the mode, and effectiveness, of social organization.

It is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too.¹

The social and the natural

The logic of our argument about the relationship between the social and the natural is similar to that about the social and the spatial. Indeed the two are closely related: the symbolism of place is often related to natural features, questions of space are intimately bound up with notions of territory and thence of land, part of the uniqueness of places is a result of physical characteristics, of landforms perhaps, or climate.

There is also once again a history to the way in which geography and geographers have conceptualized the relationship. And once again, too, it is bound up with debates within the social sciences more generally.

Probably the most notorious school of thought upon this subject has been that of environmental determinism, with its view that an important explanation of the way in which society is organized, and human beings behave, is the natural environment. It is a school which in its extreme and developed form faded from the forefront of geographical thought many decades ago. It is important to mention it now because it left a legacy. It was a legacy which took many forms: that natural wealth, richness in natural resources, was responsible for economic development, the physical dereliction of inner cities for the destitution of their inhabitants, that 'natural' causes – drought, flood, crop failure – were responsible for famine, hunger and poverty in large parts of the world.

The school which challenged environmental determinism toned down but by no means eradicated that legacy. This was the school of 'possibilism'. It was an inelegant but accurate title, for what the possibilists argued was that nature had to be seen not as determining social action, but as providing a set of options and constraints. You cannot mine coal where none exists, but the existence of coal does not spontaneously produce a mine. 'Society decides.' Yet this view, in spite of its differences from environmental determinism, also shared something with it. For both schools, the way in which nature was conceptualized was unproblematical; its physical reality was simply evident.

But recent decades, again, have seen major critiques both of this way of conceptualizing nature and of the remnants of the determinist view. Indeed

in many ways the new argument sought to turn determinism on its head. It was designed to combat the notion of unmediated natural cause. Quite correctly it pointed to the social causes of famine, to the social articulation of what the media announced on the news as 'natural disasters', to the fact that the availability or otherwise of resources was a social question, that while on the one hand the cry was going up that resources were running out, on the other hand coal mines, for instance, were being closed up with good coal still within them. It was essentially an optimistic critique, and it was important. Phenomena which are the product of society are changeable. The natural – just like the spatial – is socially constructed.

But – as in the case of the spatial – the critique went too far and threw out too much. Instead of a real reconceptualization it made the social all-powerful and eradicated nature. But the social is not all there is: social relations are constructed in and as part of a natural world. Nor is it simply a question of options and constraints, as the possibilists would have it. For that is to posit again the notion of two separate spheres. We can only think of the social conquering the natural, or of the natural presenting constraints to the social, if the two spheres are initially assumed to be separate.

Once again conceptualization is central. Ideas of nature, just like those of space, have changed dramatically through history. There have been contrasts between societies and conflicts within them over what should be the dominant view. And those conflicts have been, and are, more than intellectual altercations; they reflect struggles over the organization of society and over what should be its priorities. The emergence of capitalism brought with it enormous changes in the dominant view of nature; from animate Mother Earth, to source of resources and profit, to the endlessly cataloguable and improvable. The geographical expansion of capitalism was often viewed in terms of putting resources to better use, gaining greater control over nature (in fact gaining greater control over other societies, and other views of nature). Conflicts between mining companies and Australian Aborigines today embody the same kinds of confrontation – the earth as source of profit from uranium or as sacred sites from time immemorial. Planning enquiries over proposed new coalfields in the midlands of England bring into confrontation notions of land as landed property, nature as resources and 'the natural' as a weekend escape. In other parts of the world, the peasants' positive use of the variety and multiple richness of nature comes up against the logic of commercial agriculture's desire to eradicate that unpredictability and richness, to control it through the application of 'science', to grow crops in endless landscapes of monoculture, to put chickens into factories, and to produce the square tomato.

To face these issues, it is necessary to go beyond the critique of the seventies.

As we said, then, the logic of this theme is similar to that of the relation between the social and the spatial. Both start from the rejection of simply autonomous spheres. In the case of the relation between society and nature,

the argument starts, certainly, by rejecting the notion of an unmediated effect of nature on society: that famine is simply the result of natural conditions, for instance, or development the result of natural resources. Natural materials are not even necessarily natural resources; certain social conditions are necessary for them to become so. Within the social sciences, if not within the world of day-to-day politics and the public media, this is clearly now a widely accepted position. But to accept that position does not mean that the world is in some sense 'totally social'. This has its implications both for the conceptualization of social processes within the social sciences and for society itself. On the one hand if we can only conceptualize 'the natural' through the prism of the social so also we need to be aware when analysing social processes that they necessarily take place within a 'natural' world. On the other hand, we recognize that social processes have effects upon the natural environment – it is an impact which, in the industrialized world, is often phrased in terms such as conquering or controlling. All such terms give the impression that society is in charge, and some of the consequences of that view are becoming increasingly apparent. From acid rain to potential climatic disaster through devastation of the world's major forests, 'nature' is hitting back. It is clear that the conceptualization of the social and the natural as two separate spheres, and in particular the variety of views (from all parts of the political spectrum) that in that duality the social (frequently manifesting itself in the noun 'man') controls the natural, is inadequate. A lot depends on our recognizing that neither 'the social' nor 'the natural' can be conceptualized in isolation from the other.

Uniqueness and interdependence

There is another way, too, in which the argument we are presenting here attempts to push forward the state of debate in the social sciences generally. Any consideration of geography in the fullest sense of the word must face up to the theoretical problem of the analysis of the unique. In one sense the very thing that we study is variation: each place is unique. This, too, is something which has been lost sight of in the social science debate of recent years, in the search after general laws, the intellectual dominance of certain forms of 'top-down' structuralism, the (quite correct) desire to relate the individual occurrence to the general cause.

It was fundamentally important to argue in the nineteen-seventies that inner-city decline stemmed from general processes of deindustrialization in the British economy, indeed from the reorientation of the position of that economy within the shifting international division of labour. It was important to counter the then prevailing orthodoxy that the explanation for the problems of the inner cities could be found within the inner cities themselves. It was important, in other words, to show how the specific outcomes (the collapse of Merseyside, the London docks, central Glasgow) were all the product of more general causes.

And yet, too, in making that point so strongly, something was sacrificed – the importance of specificity, the ability to explain, understand, and recognize the significance of, the unique outcome.

The fundamental methodological question is how to keep a grip on the generality of events, the wider processes lying behind them, without losing sight of the individuality of the form of their occurrence. Pointing to general processes does not adequately explain what is happening at particular moments or in particular places. Yet any explanation must include such general processes. The question is how. Too often a solution has been sought through an uneasy, and untenable, juxtaposition of two kinds of explanation. On the one hand, the ‘general’, whether it be in the form of immanent tendencies or empirically identified wider processes, is treated in deterministic fashion. On the other hand, since the infinite variety of reality does not in fact conform to this logic, additional factors are added on, in ad hoc and descriptive fashion, to explain (explain away) the deviation.

But variety should not be seen as a deviation from the expected; nor should uniqueness be seen as a problem. ‘General processes’ *never* work themselves out in pure form. There are always specific circumstances, a particular history, a particular place or location. What is at issue – and to put it in geographical terms – is the articulation of the general with the local (the particular) to produce qualitatively different outcomes in different localities. To take an example: the decentralization of ‘women’s jobs’ has taken place in recent decades in the United Kingdom to a whole range of regions – to East Anglia, South Wales, Cornwall. But the impact of that decentralization (the result, the outcome) has been different in each place. Each region was distinct (unique) before the process took place, and in each place the local conditions/ characteristics operated on the general processes to produce a specific outcome. In each case uniqueness was reproduced, and in each case it was also changed. If this is in some sense ‘structural analysis’, it is in no sense simply ‘top-down’.

This issue is important. Most obviously it is important to be able rigorously to explain particularity. Only then is it possible to understand a society as it is, in its specific form and with its internal variations. But it is also that this specificity is in turn important *in* explanation. In ‘geographical questions’ this is so in a number of ways: as we have just argued, regional specificity has an impact on the operation of general, national or international level processes, for instance. And the whole mosaic of regional specificities, the fact of geographical variety itself – in the labour movement, in unemployment rates, in political traditions – can have an enormous impact on the way that society ‘as a whole’, at national level, is reproduced and changed. These examples are taken from human geography and relate to one of its central concerns: the fact of uneven development and of interdependent systems of dominance and subordination between regions on the one hand, and the specificity of place on the other. It is in this form that the problem of the general and the unique most clearly presents itself to geography. It is a

problem which has been around for some time. As we saw, the positivist spatial scientists threw out the unique as unamenable to anything but description. The radical critique recognized it but saw the most important task to be linking the specific to the general. That task is still important. But it is also necessary to reassert the existence, the explicability, and the significance, of the particular. What we do here is take up again the challenge of the old regional geography, reject the answers it gave while recognizing the importance of the problem it set, and present our own, very different solution.

The structure of the book

Our overall theme, then, is that geography, in the fullest sense of the word, matters. This argument is presented in different ways in each of the sections which follow.

The first two pieces are basic building blocks. They address head on the question of conceptualization, considering in turn the two key terms of our discussion: nature and space. We have already argued that the conceptualization of each has varied both between societies and within them. Mick Gold, in his consideration of 'the history of nature', and Robert Sack in his discussion of 'societal conceptions of space' each trace out elements and aspects of this variation. Mick Gold concentrates on variations through time in European conceptualizations of nature; while Robert Sack contrasts views of space in what he terms respectively 'primitive' and 'civilized' societies. From both pieces two things are clear: that the issue of conceptualization is bound up with social form and social order, and that in both maintaining and challenging social orders different forms of conceptualization of both space and nature are frequently at stake.

Mick Gold's article in effect encapsulates the whole of our argument about the relation between the social and the natural. As he makes clear, the issue of what is the socially dominant conceptualization of that relation has more than an intellectual significance. It is also utterly practical. What is needed is a theory of social change which fully incorporates the fact of its existence as an integral part of a physical world, and social practices which work within that knowledge.

Sack, too, presents powerful arguments relating conceptions of space to the internal organization of society. In 'primitive' societies, he argues, the organic relationship between the individual and society is reflected in the relationship between society and milieu. The emergence of 'civilized' societies involves the separation of these terms, and their attempted recombination. In that context, the territorial definition of society becomes central to the maintenance of control. Sack makes a point perhaps too often overlooked: that 'Whatever else a state may be or do, it is territorial.' A challenge to territory is a challenge to the state. In other ways, too, from territorial control over the workplace, to its use of the symbolism of national shrines and holy

places, civilized society requires and uses particular, and varied, conceptions of space and place.

It is not just that geography, in the sense of space and nature, matters, but that the way in which we conceptualize those terms in the first place is crucial too.

These two articles follow immediately after this Introduction. The rest of the book is divided into three further sections. In the first of these: 'Analysis: aspects of the geography of society', we examine a set of different individual elements of the functioning of society, particular social processes, or bundles of social processes. The ones we have chosen concern the urban economy, cultural forms and international law. They are deliberately varied, because our aim is to show how spatial structure and changes in geographical organization are important to the functioning of a wide range of social processes. The next section: 'Synthesis: interdependence and the uniqueness of place', is where we address the question of specificity, the problem of relating the general and the unique. We pose it in the context of understanding uneven development – a context where interdependence and uniqueness are two sides of the same coin – and present an alternative answer to the challenge posed by the old regional geography. In the final section: 'Geography and society', we address the issue at the broadest level – why does 'geography' matter to the functioning of society as a whole? This can be tackled at a variety of levels and from a number of angles. Some of them will already have become obvious from discussions earlier in the book. In this last section, however, we have decided to address two major questions for the future – the challenges, from above and below, to the fundamental political territorial unit of the modern world, the nation state; and the question of what threats to society have arisen from the presently dominant forms of relation between the social and the natural: what is the relation between the prospects for ecodoom and the way in which society is organized? Both of these major questions have at their centre the fact that society is part of a world in which both 'the spatial' and 'the natural' are fundamental components.

Notes

- 1 These arguments are developed further in Massey, D. B. (1984) *Spatial Divisions of Labour: social structures and the geography of production*, Macmillan; and in Massey, D. B. (1984) 'New directions in space' in Urry, J. and Gregory, D. (eds.), *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, Macmillan.