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Human geography and societal change

... if spatial organization makes a difference to how society works and how it changes, then far from being the realm of stasis, space and the spatial are also implicated (*contra* Laclau) in the production of history – and thus, potentially, in politics (Massey 1992: 70)

This is a book about the geography of societal or socio-cultural change. By the terms societal or socio-cultural, I mean society in its wider sense, that is, as a compound of its cultural, social, political and economic forms. Throughout, I will use the terms societal or socio-cultural to capture this wider generic meaning and the terms cultural, social, political and economic when I want to refer to changes that are rooted in more specific aspects of society's character. However, this clarification of terminology is not without its problems when reviewing the debate over the nature of society and how it changes. Social theorists, within and without geography, have tended to use terms like social change generically, as a cover for all aspects of society's constitutive character. Yet the way in which the debate over what matters most, or what is determinate, has shifted, with current views favouring a cultural turn, is itself an argument for a terminological usage that is able to differentiate between the whole and its parts, even if some parts are seen as capable of shaping or grounding the whole.

In addressing the geography of societal change, I do not mean the descriptive study of where change has taken place or the reconstruction of particular instances of change within their geographical setting. That change happens somewhere and has a geography is self-evident and hardly needs stating. To say that we are interested in societal change because it produces new geographies is also self-evident. Rather is my objective to show how understanding this geography can contribute to a concept of how society changes, one that helps to explain how and why change tends to occur where it does. In seeking to develop such an understanding, I want to build on the assumption that the geography of societal processes is not some minor side-show, of interest only

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to geographers. As an increasing number of social theorists and geographers have claimed, the 'spatiality' of society, the way in which it uses space, matters fundamentally to the very nature of society and its constitutive processes. 'There are', declares Soja, 'no aspatial social processes' (Soja 1996: 46; Soja 1989). We live in a world that is only meaningful through the fact that it is tangible, built around concrete experiences and situations. But equally, it is only meaningful through the fact that it is spatially as well as temporally extended, an accumulation of spaces as much as it is an accumulation of moments. I want to suggest that seeing the geography of societal change as contributing to a wider concept of change is a logical extension of this debate about the spatiality of social life. As an agenda, it requires us to consider how far the process of societal change is articulated geographically and, following on from this, whether there are types of change that use space strategically so that their analysis in geographical terms provides an essential basis for their understanding.

The retreat from structure

In so far as human geography has addressed the wider problem of societal change, it has shown little real conviction over producing a geographically sensitive reading of the problem, one that binds geography into the processes of change. If we look at the branch of the discipline whose subject matter should be shot through with such insights, historical geography, we find that it has actually engaged the problem in an uneven and selective way. Arguably, the exemplary work of writers like Sauer (1952) and Meinig (1986 and 1993) on 'big-picture' themes has not been matched by an entrenched and maturing interest in such themes amongst historical geographers at large. Meinig's *Shaping of America* especially, has much to say on matters of socio-cultural change, generally as well as specifically. In Britain, Darby's work on the mapping of the Domesday Book also rates as a project of a comparable scale and vision (Darby 1977). However, with its emphasis on the use of large-scale data sets to reconstruct past geographies, Darby's methodology tended to reduce historical geography to a succession of static images with little of real significance for the wider debate over societal change. To be fair, Darby himself argued that these cross-sectional approaches should be linked via comparative analyses that both highlighted and explained the changes in between (Darby 1962: 127–56), but the dynamic introduced by such comparative analyses did easily melt the somewhat frozen detail out of which his geographies were produced.

Yet whilst it could be argued that historical geographers generally have shown only limited interest in large-scale syntheses, they cannot be accused of lacking interest in societal change from a conceptual or empirical point of view. An increasing number of studies have addressed specific aspects, but

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methodologically, their approach has largely been close-focused, stressing, albeit in different ways, the situatedness of knowledge about change. Some have been largely text-based, engaging in the discourse over themes like modernity (Gregory 1990a: 217–33; Gregory 1991: 17–44; Harris 1991: 671–83) or changes in the nature of power (Philo 1991: 137–61; Driver 1992: 147–56) through the work of particular scholars and stressing how interpretations are socially constructed. Others have been place-based, researching local or regional instances of change through a powerful blend of theory and data. Langton and Höppe's work on early Swedish industrialization well illustrates this sort of approach (Langton and Höppe 1995). Though they are amongst those who have also considered change on a much larger scale (Langton and Höppe 1983), their stress on the need to see early Swedish industrialization through the recovery and specification of local time–space geographies exemplifies the close-focus approach of much that has been written in historical geography over recent years. In fact, despite the far-reaching shifts in the subject matter of historical geography over the 1980s and 90s, and a growing concern for concepts, much of the drift of recent work has been to reinforce rather than weaken the primacy of reductionist methodologies and to stress the problems attached to large-scale, overarching generalizations (see, for example, Butlin 1993; Philo 1994: 252–81; Baker 1996: 1–24; but see Baker 1982: 233–43). Of course, in this respect, we are simply acknowledging that many historical geographers have been influenced, knowingly or unknowingly, by post-modernist thinking and the turn against metatheory. In this sense, Gregory's recent call for a greater awareness of how a geography of the body and personal space can be linked in with the wider notion of spatiality, for recognizing 'the corporeality of vision', appears a natural extension of how historical–geographical discourse has moved in recent years (Gregory 1994: 416).

The shift towards a more reductionist and personalized perspective is of course part of a wider trend within human geography. The high-water mark of human geography as a would-be/could-be science based on some form of spatial analysis has long passed. Indeed, relatively few would now defend a view of human geography that seemingly dehumanized landscape by reducing it to a patterning of equilibrated systems and gravity formulations that had human interaction decaying in a perfectly graduated and normative way as one moved away from centres of population. Nothing better illustrates this shift than the extent to which those who pioneered such an approach with so much distinction in the 1950s and 60s have themselves been instrumental in trying to re-people human geography's landscapes of study. The economic geographer, Berry, is amongst those who can now be met on the road from Damascus. In a recent overview of economic geography, he has called for it to be reformulated so as to incorporate a cultural component, a greater sensitivity to how different cultures construct their own reading of economic geography.

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Explicating this cultural component, he suggests, must be ‘the first step towards the reconstruction of economic geography’s conceptual core’ (Berry 1989: 18). In step with what has happened in human geography as a whole, Berry has shifted his analysis from the study of physical structures, networks and systems in their own terms, to their study as socio-cultural constructions.

Geographers have a double problem here, for the assertion that ‘every object’ is ‘an object for a subject’ (Ley 1977: 498) applies as much to their own vision of the world as to the visions of those whom they study. Instead of a human geography built around a simple or primary observer–object relationship, or around how the geographer observes and records the world, it has become a discipline more concerned with secondary observer–object relationships, dealing with how the geographer observes other people observing, categorizing or experiencing the world, a shift in emphasis which compares with the emic/etic debate in anthropology (Harris 1979: 32–4). Once we admit this degree of relativity, with all its problems of ‘double translation’ (Olsson 1982: 223) or – to use a geographical metaphor for the potential miscegenation of meaning – ‘travelling theory’ (Gregory 1994: 9–14), the notion of geography as an objective or stable science fades. In fact, for some, ‘unmasking’ geography’s ‘pretensions of objectivism’ (ibid.: 86) is not an incidental consequence of recent shifts in perspective, but its primary goal.

Inevitably, this permeation of human geography by relativism has been accompanied by a reevaluation of the role played by structure or determination in geography. Gregory has played an instrumental role in driving this debate and has provided the most comprehensive and sustained critique of geographical structure. In part, he bases his rejection on moral grounds. The understanding of societal systems and structures in terms of imperatives and constraints provides the basis for a system of social control. However, it is also a question of concept. He rejects such approaches because of their inability to handle the purposiveness of social systems and ‘the semantics and sociology of discourse’ (Gregory 1980: 335). For Gregory, a critical human geography deals with ‘knowledgeable’ or reflexive beings rather than structures and systems that function in silence. Influenced by Habermas’s proposition that societal change is, in the first instance, about changes in social consciousness, that is, about changes in intersubjectivity and communicative rationality, Gregory believes that no amount of tinkering with systems theory can embody the nuances of meaning and richness of values embodied in such dimensions of social consciousness.

A close reading of his work suggests a progressive and deepening emasculation of structure as an independent source of determination for society. In his early writing, he clearly found Thompson’s notion of a ‘bounded human agency’ helpful to his thinking, conceding that ‘a concept of determination has to be allowed back in; but in terms which return us once again to the capacities and capabilities of a bounded human agency’ (Gregory 1981: 13).

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Amongst available methodologies, he has some sympathy with structuration theory because it treats the properties of social systems as both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute them. By linking structure and practice together in this way, structure ceases to be beyond the reach of everyday social practice, with its own logic and history. In the process, it also ceases to be 'a constraint or a barrier to action but is instead essentially involved in its reproduction' (ibid.: 10). Latterly, though, Gregory has defined his position more starkly. Whereas Giddens juxtaposed structure 'as recursively organized sets of rules and resources' existing 'out of time and space' with system as 'the situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space' (Giddens 1984: 25), Gregory finds the former too typological and abstract, preferring instead to give more emphasis to the latter: the individual settings and instances of social reproduction (Gregory 1994: 123). He aligns himself here with Mann. His restatement of Mann's assertion that the history of power is the 'history of particular places' (Mann 1986: 40) could just as easily be paraphrased as the history of all geography is the history of particular places or of the 'complexities of particular places' as Harris put it (Harris 1991: 681). Seemingly, for Gregory, there are no hidden structures, or rules governing such structures, waiting to be discovered. Herein lies a vital disagreement with Giddens. For both, all social life is contingent and contextual, but whereas Giddens accepts that there may be hidden organizing rules to be discovered that apply out of time and space, Gregory feels that the study of each particular place or locale is sufficient unto itself and has no need of wider reference.

In seeking to suppress any autonomous or paramount role for structure, Gregory's aim is the wholly laudable one of releasing human geography's humanist potential, unfettered by structural and material constraints or ready-packaged as a study in control systems for those in power. Towards this end, he has long argued in principle and by example that human geography should be grounded in social theory. As well as making the role of structure more transparent, this has had the effect of narrowing – one might even say, constraining – the conceptual material out of which its discourse is now woven. From being a subject that is richly grounded in all areas of the social sciences, it threatens today to become rooted solely in social theory *sensu stricto*. Indeed, some would claim that instead of standing in geography, and thinking about social theory, we should reposition ourselves so as to stand in social theory and think geographically.

Social theory and geography

It is crucial to any understanding of how social theory has colonized human geography to realize that the discovery, like all true discoveries of one culture by another, was mutual. Social theorists began incorporating geography into

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their thinking, a flattering of the spatial perspective which has encouraged geographers to reciprocate. Two social theorists have been especially influential: Giddens and Lefebvre.

As already indicated, Giddens tames the freedom or autonomy of structure by using structuration theory, but it can hardly be said that he dispenses with structure. He acknowledges the traditional definition of structure as something that has formative or architectural qualities, and which, being 'external' to human action, acts 'as a source of constraint' on the individual (Giddens 1984: 16). By comparison, his own treatment of structure seeks to bring it within reach of social practice by treating it as part of a duality whereby structure and everyday social practice are linked recursively, each being both the medium and outcome for the other. Seen in this way, structure becomes 'reproduced social practices' that exist as 'time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents' (ibid.: 17). Around these core ideas, however, Giddens uses structure freely and in ways that give it a potent geographical meaning. The key to this geographical meaning lies in his concept of time-space distanciation, or 'the stretching of social systems across time-space' incorporating and integrating presence and absence (ibid.: 181). Seen in relation to the notion of time-space distanciation, structure is not something tangible in itself but comprises 'the structuring properties' that help bind social systems in time-space via social practice and which enabled 'similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them "systemic" form' (ibid.: 17). In short, structure is made up of 'principles of organization' that sustain 'recognizably consistent forms of time-space distanciation' (ibid.: 181). The main structural principles derive from what he calls the structures of domination around which society and its social practices are ordered: these can be broken down into the 'containers' that 'store allocative and authoritative resources' (ibid.: 262). Again, implicit in these principles, is the fact that such resources underpin and sustain the time-space distanciation of a society.

Many human geographers have responded positively to Giddens's theory of structuration. However, I want to confine myself to Pred's handling of the concept for he uses it so as to produce a geographically framed interpretation of change that is particularly insightful, one that must be confronted in any reconceptualization of the problem. Its power as a reworking stems from the way he tries to align structuration theory with the concepts of time-geography. With its stress on duality rather than dualism, structuration theory enables the analysis of individual life-paths, with their mix of possibility and constraint, to be bound in a reciprocal way to the institutional projects around which time-geography is organized: the former representing everyday social practices and the latter, structure. In his own words, if 'all society's formal and informal institutions are project-bound' then the 'detailed situation and

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material continuity of structuration are perpetually spelled out by the intersection of individual paths with institutional projects occurring at specific temporal and spatial locations' (Pred 1984: 281–2). Pred turns this statement about the ongoingness of social practices and structures into a concept of change through the way in which he develops the notion of instantiation, or the fact that social structures exist only in their implementation via social practices in specific time–space situations (*ibid.*: 280–1). Because of the way different social practices intersect or are coupled through each instantiation, they can be said to produce place or geography. At the same time, because the social practices that exist at each moment are a product of past experience, 'a previously sedimented array of cultural and social practices' (*ibid.*: 285), and because of the way in which they all interact via life-paths and institutional projects, they have the potential both to reproduce and transform each other, both as practices and as structures (*ibid.*: 281; Pred 1985: 343). For this reason, Pred presents place and change as inextricably linked. Places exist only through the constant reproduction of their social and cultural forms via situated social practices. Through this reproduction, Pred sees each place as constituted through a process of becoming, always having the potential to change. Yet though place is constituted through a process of becoming, this process of becoming is historically contingent, constrained by past experience and the situated or prior social practices through which it works itself out.

Like Giddens, Pred is inclined to convert structure into a digestible form, to refine it, in order that it can be reproduced through social practices and life-paths. We can see this in his treatment of structure. In keeping with much that is being written in human geography at present, he sees power relations as being at the heart of social structure (Pred 1985: 339). Following Foucault, these are seen by Pred as inseparable 'from the realm of action and everyday practices' (*ibid.*: 339). The subjugation of power relations to everyday practice though, is more easily assumed than demonstrated. Whilst being given sufficient power of determination to succeed at being hegemonic, they are also sufficiently embedded or ensnared within day-to-day practice to be reproduced and transformed by it. How much needs to be accommodated is well shown by Pred's handling of language. At one and the same time, language is one of the most innovative yet most inertial of cultural traits. But faced with an interpretation that draws everything on board, Pred sees the transformation of language and its associated codes as bound up with institutional projects and as part of the 'process whereby power relations become practices and practices become power relations' (*ibid.*: 340). Clearly, there is little scope for cultural inertia or lags here, language being entirely internalized within the social process of the moment in an ongoing process of becoming.

Another influential figure in human geography's recent search for a socio-theoretic base has been the French social theorist, Lefebvre. Like Giddens, he has devoted much thought to how space should be incorporated into a theory

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of society. The central tenet of his thinking on the matter is that space is not given or outside of social practices and their performance, but is produced through social practice itself. All space, in other words, is social space, a social product made out of a raw material that is Nature (Lefebvre 1991: 84). At first, the character of this produced space was 'biomorphic and anthropological' (ibid.: 229), but in time, and especially with the rise of capitalism, its character became less immediate. It acquired 'a sort of reality of its own', associated with but distinct from the commodities and capital of the global economy (ibid.: 26). It also became 'a means of control, and hence of domination; of power' (ibid.: 26), a landscape configured by the social relations of capitalism.

Stated thus far, his ideas offer little that would be considered particularly insightful to human geographers given what has been written over the past decade, with or without Lefebvre. However, his interpretation has other more critical dimensions to it. First, and of direct interest to the central theme of this book, is his suggestion that whilst landscapes and places are seen as having a vital inheritance of forms and practices, 'space is always, now and formerly a *present* space, given an immediate whole, complete with its association and connections in their actuality' (ibid.: 37). This supposed erasure of space's compounded past is a theme in Lefebvre's work that I will respond to later. Second, and crucial to the inner logic of his argument, 'production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects, not as two separable ideas' (ibid.: 37). This inseparability has this consequence for how we see space. Because it is the outcome of a process, a sequence of operations, it cannot be treated as 'a simple object' (ibid.: 73). This is a critical insight, one that has been commented on by Merrifield. The production of Lefebvorean space, he argued, comprises the process as well as the outcome. Referring to the sequences and flows that produced it, and the way in which flows of capital and resources undergo 'thingification' around particular points in the form of fixed capital, Lefebvorean space becomes 'the totality of the flow and thing' (Merrifield 1993: 521 and 525). Of course, this has the effect of binding space into social theory as part of its problematic. A third influential feature of Lefebvre's conceptualization of space is the way in which he explored capitalism's capacity to differentiate space and to create tensions and conflicts within it, notably that between the global and what he calls the sub-divided or fragmented, a contradiction that embraces what would conventionally be seen as core-periphery conflicts. It was through these tensions and conflicts that he felt space was assuming a greater role in society, a view strongly buttressed by his belief that capitalism's production of space in various forms was in part responsible for 'the survival of capitalism' (Lefebvre 1991: 346). A fourth theme in Lefebvre's thought is really a subset of the previous theme but deserves to stand on its own. It is Lefebvre's suggestion, one taken up and much developed by Harvey and others, that the overall nature of capitalism has changed, with the arena of urbanization now being more important to

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capitalism than industrialization *per se* (ibid.: 321–40; Harvey 1985: 185–226; Soja 1989: 97).

Lefebvorean concepts of space have been widely utilized by geographers. Harvey's work has been especially significant in diffusing them amongst geographers. Yet whilst acknowledging that we owe the broad concept of space 'as social power' to Lefebvre (Harvey 1989: 226), Harvey has not hesitated to rework them through his own reading of space within a capitalist framework. Arguably, he has taken Lefebvre's rather coarse shift of capital from a phase of industrialization to a phase in which urbanization is more important and has produced a more fine-textured analysis of how capitalism has been phased in its strategic use of space, drawing out more clearly not only the cyclic switches that can take place between the primary and secondary flows of capital, but its recent phasing in terms of Fordism, post-Fordism and flexible accumulation. In doing so, he has given a different emphasis to two aspects of the argument. First, it is difficult when reading Harvey's analysis of capital, and the tension created by the conflict between mobile and fixed capital, not to be left with the impression that he has not wholly accepted Lefebvre's notion of space as both process and product. The very essence of the contradiction involved is that capital needs to be mobile, yet cannot recover that part of itself already sunk into the fixed capital. When Harvey talks about this being not just a source of tensions but of 'contradictions' (Harvey 1978: 124; Harvey 1985: 24–5), he is surely arguing that however much capital, and its embedded social relations, may wish to rework landscape as process, what is of the essence to capitalism is that it does not wholly succeed. In other words, there is a part of space that remains ineluctably a product, a spent decision over how resources of space should be used. This leads directly to my second point which is that compared to Lefebvre, Harvey seems to favour a different position on how time and space relate to each other. Certainly, Lefebvre does not neglect time, nor can he be said to ignore how it substitutes for space. At one point, he asked what does a buyer get when he purchases a space, and answered it by saying time (Lefebvre 1991: 356). As the passage quoted earlier shows, though, he seemed inclined to collapse time into the flatter, singular form of synchronic time, with any inherited processes being treated as part of a single totality irrespective of the rate of turnover or change at which they are moving. Harvey meanwhile, through his declared project to reconstruct the historical geography of capitalism, offers a more developed view of how capitalism moves through time and of how time–space compression has accentuated its tensions (i.e. Harvey 1989: 211–59), trends which he sees as so fundamental to the modern world that he calls for the 'positioning [of] our geography between space and time' (Harvey 1990: 433). Arguably, such a view can only be meaningful if it allows for the experience of time to be variable, or produced socially just like space (Harvey 1989: 223–5), so that each moment in space is potentially diachronic in terms of the different relations

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and processes that it brings together as a simultaneous experience (cf. Massey 1992: 81).

Lefebvre's particular treatment of time does, in fact, raise a further, more general point, one that is intimately linked to the growing emasculation of structure as a factor in socio-cultural change. As part of his attempt to raise the significance of space within social theory, he tended to suppress the role of historical time or historicity. 'Points and systems of reference inherited from the past', he proclaimed, 'are in dissolution' (Lefebvre 1991: 416). Their 'values crumble and clash' (ibid.: 417). In a phrase that strikes at the very core of his argument, he argued that all past values and historical forms are now subjected to 'a *trial by space*', one that sifts and sorts them spatially (ibid.: 417–18). Taken on its own, this last point is hardly contentious. However, his suggestion that the past is *currently* undergoing 'a *trial by space*' contains a much more radical assertion. Put simply, he sees the link between the past and present, at least in today's terms, as being attenuated or, to use his own phrase, 'in dissolution': so much so that it amounts to something of a disjuncture. Others have echoed the rather surgical way in which he would now have us separate past from present. Jameson, for instance, claims the present as now 'autoreferential' (Jameson 1991: xii) and that there has been a break in the 'signifying chain' between past, present and future (ibid.: 127), with time reduced to 'a series of pure and unrelated presents in time' (ibid.: 27). The very essence of post-modernism, he argues, is 'a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace' (ibid.: 309), leaving the present almost as a *non sequitur*. Bhabha too, speaks of a 'disjunctive present' (Bhabha 1994: 254), but his purpose is slightly different, being to challenge the notion that the history or narrative of culture can be written in 'homogeneous, serial time' (ibid.: 37). Rather is culture being constantly driven across the differences that come from what he labels as the 'enunciative split' between *énoncé* and enunciation, a split that admits cultural differences through a continual translation of meaning and which thereby destroys 'the logics of synchronicity and evolution' (ibid.: 36–7 and 164). This supposed instantaneity of experience within post-modern or, for Bhabha, post-colonial society, is bound up with the weakening of structure as a determining factor in socio-theoretic discourse, for the claimed disjuncture between past and present signals the capacity of social process to remake the world *and its structures* afresh, to provide it with an enunciation that is continually of the moment.

Geography and the retrieval of structure

In turning to a more direct critique of these recent trends in human geography and associated readings of spatiality, I want to make it clear that I see the debate on whether human geography should be grounded in behavioural, cog-