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# Advancing Human Geography at the *Commencement du Siècle*\*

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Human geography today exhibits unprecedented vitality and diversity. This survey first charts some major lines of research in the field in light of the ascendancy of critical theory, political economy, and poststructuralist thought, including feminism, the cultural turn, consumption, urban geography, and globalization. Next, it focuses on several “cutting-edge” issues, such as race, postcolonialism, the social construction of nature, representations of space, and cyberspace. Finally, the article turns an eye toward the future, offering comments on the discipline’s likely trajectories with regard to the blurring of traditional dualisms, methodological integration, and the lacunae of public policy and geographic education. **Key Words:** critical human geography, poststructuralism.

**T**his essay aspires to two simple goals. First, it offers a brief retrospective of critical human geography in its multiple forms, including various forms of social theory, political economy, and poststructuralism, which has come to dominate much, but not all, of human geography. Second, it examines the discipline’s emerging tendencies that are likely to form important foci of attention in the future. It concludes with comments on strengths to build on and weaknesses to be overcome. No short review article, of course, could possibly hope to do justice to the vast numbers and sheer diversity of ideas and topics to be found in contemporary human geography. Obviously, in the brief space allotted here, this article can only touch on a few essentials and necessarily overlooks other aspects; there are, for example, important differences of opinion within the various perspectives sketched here.

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## Prolegomenon: The Era of Posts

Since the 1980s, growing social concern for diversity and multicultural pedagogy have fueled a variety of perspectives best known for what they are not: postpositivist, postmodern, poststructuralist, post-Marxist, and postcolonial. While far from constituting a homogenous whole, these views nonetheless have certain attributes in common. All of them take seriously matters of consciousness, language, and representation; all share a distrust of overly deterministic explanations and an appreciation for the

contingent, open-ended nature of social life; and all exhibit a common belief in the relative, situated nature of truth (Hubbard et al. 2002). Five topic areas are briefly sketched here: feminism; the cultural turn; identity and place; the “L.A. School” of urbanists; and globalization. To be sure, critical human geography does not comprise the entirety of the field, and it has borrowed extensively from older paradigms, such as positivism. Indeed, much of its creativity derives from syncretism that facilitates constructive combinations of the traditional and the avant-garde.

### *Feminist Interventions*

Feminist geography has matured wonderfully to become a vital part of the discipline, offering increasingly sophisticated understandings of how gender relations permeate every facet of social life and space (Massey 1994; Hanson and Pratt 1995; Seager and Domosh 2001), how gender relations are intimately woven into existing allocations of resources and modes of thought in ways that generally perpetuate patriarchy. Feminism has cultivated a wider appreciation of gender relations, including masculinity (Jackson 1991). To ignore gender is to assume that men’s lives are “the norm,” that there is no fundamental difference in the ways in which men and women experience and are constrained by social relations. Widely recognized as the first non-class-based form of social determination to acquire legitimacy, gender has been thoroughly denaturalized: while gender roles

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may appear “natural,” they are socially constructed as webs of masculinity and femininity. Feminism as a political project aspires, not to annihilate gender, but to erase gender as a power category—that is, to denaturalize patriarchy, part of a broader poststructuralist uncoupling of truth from power. Feminist geography has unpacked the ways in which space and gender are mutually constitutive and transformative in, for example, the manner in which urban space is divided into (predominantly male) public and (largely female) private domains. Moreover, feminism has changed not simply what geographers study, but how they study it: broadening its scope from the ontological to the epistemological (cf. Rose 1993); legitimizing the use of qualitative methods; breaking down the power relations between researchers and their subjects; emphasizing that knowledge is always a situated view from somewhere, that it is context-bound; and advocating new avenues such as participant observation, standpoint theory, and grounded theory.

#### *The Cultural Turn*

Sensitized to the need to incorporate a more flexible understanding of human consciousness, economic geographers delved into the mechanics of post-Fordist production and organizational strategies (Amin 1994). They direct particular attention at dense urban networks of interactions among firms in light of vertical integration and disintegration, subcontracting, “untraded dependencies,” and local linkages to the global economy (Storper 1997). This body of work pointed to the roles played by “non-economic” factors such as tacit knowledge, learning, reflexivity, conventions, expectations, trust, uncertainty, and reputation in the interactions of actors. Drawing upon Granovetter’s (1985) famous notion of embeddedness, economic geographers emphasized culture as a complex, contingent set of relations every bit as important as putatively “economic” factors in the structuring of economic landscapes (Thrift and Olds 1996). Notions such as actor-network theory, for example, humanize abstract economic processes by showing them to be the products of agents enmeshed in webs of power and meaning.

The cultural turn also took geographers from matters of production to the arena of consumption, a topic long dominated by neoclassical

economics (Gregson 1995; Bell and Valentine 1997). This reading moves far beyond the sterile self-interest of *homo economicus* (Miller 1992), even when it is dressed up in the rhetoric of imperfect information and suboptimizing behavior or Marxist views of commodity fetishism, to portray consumption, not simply as an economic act, but simultaneously a social one embedded in local and national relations of production, class, gender, and power; a psychological one that reproduces identity; and an ecological one that forms the end of value-added chains stretching across the planet (Hartwick 1998). The spatiality of consumption is thus defined as a multiscalar process (Marsden and Wrigley 1999).

#### *Identity, Body, and Place*

Drawing from phenomenological concerns for the shape of human experience, poststructuralist geographers emphasized the relations of identity and place (Pile and Thrift 1995; Kirby 1996). While classical theories of the subject portrayed identities as unitary and stable, postmodernists argued identity is a multiplicity of unstable, context-dependent traits, sometimes contradictory, which change over time and space. Individual and collective identities are power relations that reflect and contest relations of normality and marginality. Identities are constructed through difference, by defining what they are not: there is always an Other, and othering is a power relation. Identities are both space-forming and space-formed: that is, they are inextricably intertwined with geographies in complex and contingent ways. Under post-Fordist capitalism, identities are rapidly being transformed by the time-space compression unleashed by telecommunications, in which hyperreality becomes the norm. This process has accelerated the emergence of identity politics that emphasizes marginalized sources of subjectivity, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and postcolonial positionality.

Likewise, the human body has become an inspirational topic for human geographers, particularly the multiple ways in which identity, subjectivity, the body, and place are sutured together (Duncan 1996; Schatzki and Natter 1997). While bodies typically appear as “natural,” they are social constructions, deeply inscribed with multiple meanings, “embodiments” of class, gender, ethnic, and other

relations. The body is the primary vehicle through which prevailing economic and political institutions inscribe the self, producing a bundle of signs that encodes, reproduces, and contests hegemonic notions of identity, order and discipline, morality and ethics, sensuality and sexuality. The body is the most personalized form of politics; all power is, ultimately, power over the body. Recent feminist perspectives on the body have highlighted the importance of gender, sexuality, and the legal dimensions of bodies as the expression of social codes stratified by sex. Haraway (1991) persuasively argues that in the current age, the boundaries between bodies and machines, the natural and the artificial, have become progressively blurred, a notion manifested in her famous “cyborgs” (cybernetic organisms), complex articulations of tissue and technologies rather than simple binary oppositions. Such a trope problematizes dominant conceptions of “nature” as non-mechanical when almost all of our bodies rely heavily on—and even incorporate as prosthetics—machines in many forms (Luke 1997). The human/machine threshold has shifted over time, never more so than in the aftermath of the microelectronics revolution of the late twentieth century. Digital technology allows for a far-reaching rescripting of the “natural” body. Like identity, the social construction of the body is thus part of the contemporary wave of time-space compression—or “distanciation,” to use Giddens’s (1984) term for how societies are stretched over time and space.

#### *Urban Geography: Los Angeles and Beyond*

In urban geography, a predominant theme has been global cities, notably London, New York, and Tokyo (Sassen 1991; Knox 1995; Taylor 2000). Global cities are the “command and control” centers in the world-system, home to massive complexes of financial firms, producer services, and corporate headquarters. They serve as arenas of interaction, allowing face-to-face contact, political connections, artistic and cultural activities; at their core, they facilitate the generation of specialized expertise upon which complex divisions of labor depend. Each city is tied through vast tentacles of investment, trade, migration, and telecommunications to clients and markets, suppliers and competitors, consumers and producers around the world. As clusters of the most labor-intensive parts

of worldwide commodity chains, global cities reflect the tendency of the global economy to centralize highly skilled, high-value-added functions in the global core and decentralize unskilled, low-value-added ones in the developing periphery.

The last decade witnessed the rise of the Los Angeles School, which drew inspiration from the specific instance of North America’s second largest metropolitan area. The original laboratory for much of the empirical work on post-Fordism and the urban division of labor, Los Angeles became the object of a broader set of concerns in the 1990s. For Soja (2000), “it all comes together in L.A.,” for Los Angeles looms as large in the public imagination as it does in the circuits of national and global capital. Soja articulates an aggressively citycentric view based on “synekism,” the creative energy that oozes from the close proximity cities offer. Dear (2002) holds that Los Angeles is the embodiment of the postmodern condition that has displaced the traditional capital of urban studies, Chicago.

#### *It’s a Small World after All: Globalization*

Given the current round of globalization, heralded by the marked expansion in the scope, volume, and velocity of international linkages, geographers have examined transnational corporations and financial systems (Dicken 1998), worldwide telecommunications networks (Warf 1995), which reflect what Castells (1996) labels the rise of the “network society” dominated by a “space of flows,” and changing regimes of national and local governance (Herod, Ó Tuathail, and Roberts 1997). Digital globalization has markedly changed the nature of national and local governance. For example, as large sums of funds flow with mounting ease across national borders, national monetary policies have become increasingly ineffective. In a Fordist world system, national monetary control over exchange, interest, and inflation rates is essential; in the post-Fordist system, however, those same national regulations appear as a drag on competitiveness, a factor underpinning worldwide moves toward deregulation and privatization.

The geography of post-Fordism has been instrumental in the ascendancy of neoliberalism. The post-Keynesian, post-Fordist state both enhanced and was enhanced by the greatly accelerated capacity of finance capital to move

effortlessly across the globe, the latest chapter in the “annihilation of space by time” that has defined the historical geography of capitalism. Climbing out of the crisis of Fordism, global capital replaced the Keynesian national “spatial fix” (Harvey 1996, 2000) with a highly fluid, globalized, neoliberal counterpart. Taylor and Flint (2000) and Agnew and Corbridge (1995) note how the “power container” of the nation-state has witnessed mounting “leakages” to and from the world-system. At the local level, globalization has heightened competition among places for capital, a process manifested in popular calls for a “good business climate,” deregulation, privatization, tax concessions, subsidies, and relaxed environmental controls (Lauria 1997).

The cultural turn in globalization studies has revealed that, far from constituting an unstoppable force, global processes are in fact embodied, interpreted, contingent, and contested (Appadurai 1996; King 1997; Featherstone and Lash 1999). By revealing how the global and the local are shot through with one another—in Swyngedouw’s (1997) term, “glocalized”—this literature has generated nuanced understandings of how globalization is manifested differently in different places (Cox 1997), thus helping to dispel simplistic assertions that globalization simply erases geographic specificity. As globalization has highlighted the contrasts among different cultures, this literature has been led into a postmodern concern with difference (Bhabha 1994).

### **Cutting Edges: Emerging Topics and Recent Directions**

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In addition to the diversity of views and topics embraced by human geographers, the future of the discipline will likely see increased emphasis on five subject areas just now coming into their own, including race and ethnicity, postcolonialism, the social construction of nature, representations of space, and cyberspace.

#### *Race and Ethnicity: Coloring Human Geography*

Human geography has recently witnessed numerous works centered on questions of race and ethnicity (Jackson and Penrose 1994; Kobayashi and Peake 1994, 2000; Delaney 2002). Like

gender, racial and ethnic identity is fundamentally a power relation that reflects and reinforces existing lines of inequality. In contrast to hegemonic ideologies that depict race and racial inequality as “natural,” critical theorists view race as simultaneously economic, political, cultural, and discursive relations (Holloway 2000). By contextualizing race as a socially constructed relation, rather than a biologically determined “given,” this literature illustrated how race is experienced and negotiated in everyday existence, its intersections with class and gender, and how racial relations of domination and subordination play out over space and time. Race may be illusory in that it is socially created. But, as Peake and Schein (2000) note, its effects are nonetheless quite “real.” Denaturalizing race thus unmasks the power relations that construct it socially and discursively. Whiteness, too, is socially constructed, typically in ways that render it invisible and “natural” (Bonnert 1997; Dwyer and Jones 2000), a position that equates ethnicity with nonwhites and underpins institutionalized racism and white privilege (Pulido 2000).

#### *Postcolonial Geographies*

In light of the influential perspective launched by Said (1978), geographers turned to Orientalism as a discourse intimately intertwined with the European conquest and penetration of non-Western spaces (Kenney 1995; Slater 1997). Sustained by a colonial worldview that naturalized Western dominance and non-Western inferiority, geography as a way of knowing—the active “geo-graphing” of various parts of the globe—was part and parcel of the colonial imagination. The ways in which space was demarcated and brought into European frames of understanding drew critical boundaries between identities, self, and other and underpinned particular regimes of power and knowledge. Colonialism was thus as much a cultural and ideological project as an economic and political one, and Eurocentric geography has long been complicit in this endeavor. Gregory (1995) focused on European colonial representations of Egypt, the stereotyped history and spaces of which were rendered sensible through the application of Western rationality. Grounding Orientalism spatially reveals how textual and discursive practices have profound material consequences, allowing, as they do, the appro-

priation of space by rendering it meaningful to those exerting control (Driver 1992).

### *Nature Is Not Natural Any More*

As topic after topic has fallen under the sway of social constructivism—including gender, poverty, the body, and race—the discipline has recently exhibited a renewed appreciation of how social relations are intertwined with the biophysical environment, particularly the social construction of nature (Fitzsimmons 1989; Proctor 1998; Castree 2001). This perspective refutes long-standing assumptions that nature is situated “outside” of human affairs, a primordial, unalterable “given.” Of course, earlier generations of geographers were well aware of and grappled with this issue. Yet, by and large, they fell victim to the dualism that divided people from the environment. By enfolded nature within social relations of material practice and discourse, the natural environment is molded, interpreted, and even created through human action. In terms of critical theory, there is no one objective knowledge of nature (e.g., as afforded by “natural science”); instead, there is only a series of socially constituted knowledges and discourses. By jettisoning the artificial dualism between “culture” and “nature”—a schism manifested in the unfortunate bifurcation between “physical” and “human” geography— theorists working within the broader domain of social theory and political economy have shown how social and ecological issues are intertwined. In this vein, political ecology is essential (Zimmerer 1994). As Gregory (2001) points out, constructions of nature and the non-Western Other were intertwined as colonized regions were enframed within Eurocentric ways of knowing that depicted “the tropics” as either fecund Gardens of Eden inhabited by child-like innocents or disease-ridden swamps populated by savages.

### *Geo-graphs: Representations and Discourses of Space*

Following the path-breaking work of Lefebvre ([1994] 1991), cultural geographers problematized representations of space (Barnes and Duncan 1992; Barnes 1996; Smith 1996; Sui 2000). If positivist and empiricist geographies implicitly held that interpretation was an un-

problematic act of “immaculate perception,” critical theorists denaturalized the manner in which space is encoded and brought into the domain of consciousness. Gregory’s *Geographical Imaginations* (1994) demonstrated how seemingly different modernist paradigms (i.e., positivism, Marxism) reflect a common underlying “scopic regime” that presumes the existence of a detached, all-knowing, objective observer, an assumption that has become increasingly questionable in an age of mounting relativism. Rather than comprising some objective “truth” independent of historical experience, however, the modernist world-as-exhibition is but one scopic regime among many, a masculinist way of enframing the world that rose concomitant with the historical process of commodifying social life and space. Because the legitimacy of representational systems derives from their connections to institutionalized commodity production and consumption, the periodic restructuring of capitalism inescapably initiates concomitant changes in symbolic systems. Thus, the late-twentieth-century crisis of representation was spawned by the massive rounds of time/space compression unleashed by contemporary globalization.

Critical human geography owes much to Foucault (Philo 2000) and takes seriously largely marginalized voices within topographies of power. In this reading, every representation is a simplification, filled with silences, for the world is inherently more complex than our language allows us to admit. Any standpoint is necessarily incomplete, linked to a power interest, and refracted through various prisms of social position. Representations must be intersubjectively shared: that is, they are only understood within the context of other representations, or intertextually. Representations escape the intentions of their creators, for the ways in which meanings are interpreted or consumed are not necessarily how they are produced. Finally, representations always have social consequences (though not always intended ones); they are saturated with politics by serving dominant or subversive discourses. Thus, they become part of the reality they help to construct. Word-making is also world-making: that is, discourses do not simply mirror the world—they constitute it. By politicizing the production and consumption of meaning, critical theory has moved from the postmodern politics of

difference to a concern for discursive regimes of truth. In this vein, Harley (1989) and Wood (1992) inaugurated the critical analysis of maps; by portraying maps as social constructions linked to power interests, they denaturalized them. Like all ideologies, the power of maps is at its greatest when we take them for granted, when they hide the interests that bring them into being. In the same vein, Pickles (1995) offered a powerful assessment of the social implications of geographic information systems (GIS), discussion of which is typically framed in technocratic terms, as if it were devoid of social roots and consequences.

### *Cybergeographies*

Although, as Hillis (1998) notes, communications has remained largely invisible within the field, the explosive growth of the Internet has stimulated mounting interest in the geography of cyberspace. Digital post-Fordist capitalism relies extensively on telecommunications to move vast sums of information and capital around the world, in the process powerfully reshaping urban form (Graham and Marvin 1996) and generating a massive, planet-wide round of time-space compression that has reconfigured social relations and the rhythms of everyday life. Human geographers have charted the multiple impacts of this change, including the growth of cybercommunities, the digital divide that separates information haves and have-nots, the growth of e-commerce, the political uses of the Internet, and the incipient domain of virtual reality (Kitchin 1998; Crang, Crang, and May 1999). This literature has jettisoned the technological determinism that holds that telecommunications simply affect space in favor of the coevolution of social relations, communications, and geographies. In an age in which ever-broader domains of everyday life are mediated electronically, this literature has moved beyond simplistic dichotomies, such as on-line and off-line, to suggest the ways in which the real and the virtual are shot through with one another. Few phenomena demonstrate the poststructural affinity for simulacra (e.g., Baudrillard) as bluntly as do cyberspace and virtual reality. Yet for all the technocratic hyperbole that surrounds it, the Internet is hardly aspatial; indeed, it is possessed of very real geographies that define its topology at different spatial scales (Dodge and Kitchin 2001).

### **Concluding Thoughts: What Might the Future Hold?**

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Human geography has changed so much and so quickly over the last decade that any prediction of its status ten years hence is undoubtedly doomed to failure. Nonetheless, it is worth pondering the manner in which recent trends may be projected into the near future. The discipline has made enormous strides in its conceptual sophistication. If any consistent theme may be found, it is the deliberate, creative blurring of what were once held to be fixed boundaries—for example, between nature and culture, culture and economy, individual and society, society and space, people and machines, the real and the virtual. Of course, to be fair, geography in the 1970s and 1980s also sought repeatedly to engage in similar undertakings. Yet the energetic willfulness with which these divisions are being erased today surpasses that of the past by a considerable margin. Similarly, critical theorists are adamant about denaturalizing the phenomena we study (e.g., the body, gender, poverty), exposing the power relations that give them legitimacy. This work shares an appreciation for complexity, the distorting effects of language, and for contingency, the capacity of human actors to do otherwise. Likewise, by charting the linkages between the global and the local, and back, geographers have become attuned to the connectivity that welds people and places together. Given these advances, it is little wonder that the social sciences have been inspired toward a “spatial turn.” Despite the common worry that geography has become hyperspecialized, creative linkages have been forged to no small degree that cross traditional lines of demarcation; in the future, this process is likely to accelerate. Conventional labels such as “economic,” “cultural,” or “urban” will have little meaning as geographers move among them with greater ease. Similarly, as social science jettisons the nineteenth-century model of disciplines, interdisciplinary work will likely assume greater importance and visibility.

Concomitantly, the suite of methodological approaches available to human geographers has acquired an unprecedented diversity. The long-standing dualism between quantitative and qualitative approaches has come under mounting scrutiny, allowing for their integration and conjoining the analysis of very different

kinds of information (Sheppard 2001). GIS and remote sensing allow for the combination of diverse layers of disparate data at multiple spatial scales; despite Pickles's (1995) concerns, GIS will attract growing legions of adherents as much for the new ways it allows issues to be conceptualized as for the analytical power it offers. The growth of web-based datasets, as well as mapping and other analytical tools, has greatly facilitated the process of secondary data acquisition. For those willing to invest the time in primary data collection, interviews and surveys will likely remain the tools of choice, although qualitative methods and approaches—including participant observation, standpoint theory, and grounded theory—have achieved widespread legitimacy for their abilities to contextualize issues, people, and ideas, in the process circumventing the old dichotomy between observer and observed. The best of human geography combines these diverse tracks, tackling complicated problems by “triangulating them” through multiple, complementary avenues of inquiry.

What kinds of questions and problems may future human geographers attempt to address? In uncoupling truth from power, what would geographies constructed by people of color look like, and how would they differ from our own overwhelmingly white disciplinary outlook? Given that the nature/society threshold has shifted so much over time, how will geographers of the future contend with the implications of biotechnology, genetic engineering, the genome project, and similar biological revolutions? With the virtual world so deeply embedded in the real, does it make sense to even attempt to differentiate them? If so, toward what end? When globalization has run its course, what will replace it? Is it even possible any longer to envision noncapitalist forms of production and distribution? What would noncommodified landscapes look like? Harvey's (2000) *Spaces of Hope* initiates this type of creative alternative to the status quo, but we have far to go in imagining better worlds less characterized by the poverty and suffering evident in vast parts of the globe.

Human geography's future may also exhibit significant analytical voids, of which two are noted here. First, the discipline's ties to public policy are poorly developed. Perhaps because many critical geographers view the state criti-

cally—that is, as a power relation tilted toward the interests of the wealthy—few geographers explicitly orient their work with an eye toward advising policymakers. Urban, economic, and political geographers tend to be concerned much more with governance than with government. Of course, academics have long held exaggerated opinions about the degree to which they actually shape public policy, leaving the nuts and bolts to urban planners and public administration. Yet while skepticism about the role of the state, particularly in an age of rampant neoliberalism, is warranted, abandoning this arena altogether can scarcely be healthy and is likely to reaffirm geography's marginality. For the discipline to feel it “makes a difference,” dissecting the origins and impacts of public policy and providing viable, progressive alternatives should remain an important current of work.

It is sobering to contrast the increasingly sophisticated theorizing in the social sciences with the simplistic, black-and-white moralizing typical among the public at large. In this respect, geography has a long way to go. Most human geographers are involved in teaching of some sort, and pedagogy is likely to be far more influential than research. Unfortunately, geographic education has remained largely isolated from the contemporary currents of the discipline, to their mutual detriment. If geographers are to build a discipline that engages the public imagination and ruptures the “capes and bays” stereotype under which it still labors, then devoting time and energy to first-class pedagogy should become a high priority. Whether it will is another question.

In any case, the rapidity with which academic fashions come and go serves to remind us all that no paradigm or perspective, no matter how enchanting it may appear at its zenith, is likely to hold sway for long. In this light, perhaps the most important asset geographers can retain is a sense of empathetic compassion, all too often missing in the academy. We are all in this difficult project of understanding space together, and a multiplicity of perspectives is our best insurance against arrogance and simplistic thinking. ■

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