

## Functional and Cultural Approaches in Geography

### *Enfoques funcionales y culturales en geografía*

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to stress the differences between the approaches developed in human geography until the sixties or seventies and those which superseded them after the cultural turn of the discipline. The analysis of the former strands of human geography will be short and consequently, sketchy; it serves only to underline the recent transformation of the discipline.

**Keywords:** Human Geography, Functional Approach, Cultural Turn, Geographical Epistemology, Disciplinary Transformation.

**Resumen.** El objetivo de este artículo es destacar las diferencias entre los enfoques desarrollados en la geografía humana hasta los años 1960 o 1970 y los que los sustituyeron tras el giro cultural de la disciplina. El análisis de las corrientes anteriores de la geografía humana será breve y, por lo tanto, esquemático: solo sirve para subrayar la reciente transformación de la disciplina.

**Palabras clave:** Geografía humana, enfoque funcional, giro cultural, epistemología geográfica, transformación disciplinaria.

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## THE FUNCTIONALIST APPROACHES IN GEOGRAPHY

The early human geographers had a limited interest in other social sciences, except anthropology and history since they wished to understand the long duration influence of natural environments on human evolution. They chose the physical and natural sciences as epistemological models and tried to develop a rigorous approach: hence their ban on subjectivity, a limited curiosity for human imagination and an emphasis on the rationality of human choices. In such a context, geographic space was mainly conceived as made of rocks, soils, vegetation, animals, human beings, the fields they tilled and the crops they grew, the flocks and herds they bred, the artefacts they used and the houses they built.

### The geography of human settlements

As basic data on the human presence on the earth surface, geographers chose initially to focus on human settlements and land use (Brunhes, 1910). At that time, statistical data on human densities were not available everywhere and were often unreliable. Human settlements appeared as a more objective basis for their inquiries.

In some areas, human beings were living permanently in the same places; in others, they kept moving with their herds and flocks: the relations of social groups to the environment were fundamentally different for *sedentary* populations and *nomadic* ones. *Semi-nomadic* peoples stood in the same place for some months every year and migrated during the others. In *transhumant* groups, only a part of the population moved with the herds.

A second opposition was also obvious: in some areas, people lived apart in dispersed settlements. Elsewhere, they flocked together in a few places. This opposition reflected the difference between the areas where people lived essentially from hunting, fishing, farming, cattle-raising, forestry or mining, and those where they relied on handicraft, industrial activities or services: there was a fundamental opposition between *town* and *country*.

In the *countryside*, settlements were sometimes dispersed in *isolated farms* or *small hamlets*; elsewhere, they were grouped in *villages*. Urban

settlements differed according to their size: *boroughs, towns, small, middle-sized and great cities, metropolises*. In some areas, cities were organized around different central places, but their built-up areas were coalescent: it was the case of the *conurbation's* characteristic of the great industrial areas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The dichotomy between country and city faded out with the progress of transport and communication facilities. Some of the advantages that life in an urban setting offered were from then on available in less densely settled and less polarized areas. The countryside retreated and *suburbanization* and *rurbanization* progressed. Some rural area ceased to be cultivated and returned to wilderness.

### From human settlements to homogeneous regions and territorial organizations made of their juxtaposition

Geographers soon added the analysis of human populations to the study of human settlements and land use: precise data on them were increasingly available where registry offices existed and periodic censuses were carried out. The demographic evolution of populations was known thanks to the statistics of births and deaths and migratory balances

The populations that geographers were studying were characterized by the tools they used, the artefacts they produced, the houses they built, the suits they wear, the languages they spoke and the political and administrative institutions they relied on. Geographers observed these facts when doing field work; they took also advantage of the publications made by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, linguists and political scientists, and of the statistics published by public services.

Human populations had specific ways of using and settling land: they had a clear impact on landscapes. The areas where people shared the same *way of life* offered similar forms of land use: they appeared as *homogeneous regions*. Their limits often coincided with those of *natural regions*, since land uses depended on the local rock outcrops, soils and climates.

Classical geography as developed from the 1890s until the mid 20th century was mainly

concerned with this type of analysis. Space was divided into areas that managed to produce practically all what they needed thanks to the ways of life their population had developed. Space was made of independently functioning regions, just as each polyp in a coral reef functioned as a unit; the juxtaposition of these units appeared as a whole characterized by symbolic ties and its personality as explained by Vidal de la Blache (Vidal de la Blache, 1903).

At that time, the spatial differentiation of the Earth was explained in terms of fertility of the soils and presence of mineral deposits.

### From homogeneous to polarized regions

The spatial divisions that geographers delineated resulted also from the development of social relations: the different places in an area were often linked with the same central place: they form a *polarized region*, which was quite different from a homogeneous one: its components had diverse land uses and productions. Each locality specialized in the activities in what it enjoyed its best advantage. Productions of goods and services were exchanged in the central place: the region took advantage of the complementarity of its parts to function as a *machine*.

The study of polarized regions started at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – it played a central role in the publications of Vidal de la Blache after 1905, for instance. People had, however, to wait the New Geography of the fifties and sixties for the systematic analysis of polarized organizations, and more generally, of the effects of flows of persons, goods and information on spatial distributions.

Polarization occurred at different scales: flows focused on a market town, a small, middle-sized or great city, a metropolis or a capital city. In all these situations, the *accessibility* of the central places was their main quality.

### A functional approach

Human geography in its classical form as well as New Geography relied on a functional approach: human beings made rational choices; they tried to maximize their utility, which involves first the maximization of their income – hence the role of *fertility* and *accessibility* in the geography of economic

activities. Since these factors played a central role in location decisions, economic forces were essential in the explanation of geographic processes.

Geographers pay only a scant attention to the imagination and sensibility of human beings. They were conscious of the variety of cultural features according to places, but since they were only concerned with their material forms, this curiosity did not modify their dominant functional approach.

The two first orientations of human geography (its classical approach and the new geography of the fifties and sixties) naturalized the world and considered only a part of human capabilities. They integrated mainly their physiological characteristics, metabolism and ecological imprint; they analyzed the way they exploited their environments, produced goods and exchanged them; their approach was largely economic.

These first approaches underscored equally the role of power relations in human distributions. International boundaries, the main territorial divisions on the earth surface, were drawn by States. Power, either as physical constraint, economic domination or moral authority and intellectual influence, was present in every kind of social relations – either castes, orders of classes.

The individuals analyzed by the classical and new geographies were endowed with intelligence and memory. They were thinking in a rational way, which meant that it was possible to understand their decisions as soon as the problems they had to solve were known. They were motivated by the quest of wealth and power. These approaches neglected the role of human imagination and the other worlds it created. They ignored that the world, the society, the individuals and space itself had both an empirical and a culturally and socially built dimension.

These approaches were essentially economic and political, social structures and territorial organization reflecting the role of power and productive forces. They were functional since they explained society as an organism or a machine fulfilling all that was necessary for its reproduction and development.

Both classical and new geographies stressed the objective structures of anthropized space: land

uses, the unequal fertility of soils and the uneven distribution of mineral resources. They considered the rights of property that socialized the human grasp on space. They knew that distance was an obstacle to human relations and stressed the advantages of central places. The logic of the spatial organizations they analyzed was based on *land prices*, which meant it reflected the two elements differentiating the earth surface, the *fertility* of soils and the *accessibility* of places.

From the beginning of the fifties, the functionalist approaches took in consideration the new mechanisms introduced by the second stage of industrial revolution. Innovations increased human daily mobility and transformed work conditions: shorter day's work, longer vacations, earlier retirement. For the wealthier employees, the home ceased to be necessarily located in the vicinity of the workplace: it was no more just a place for the reproduction of workforce. It was appreciated for its convenience and the proximity it offered to theaters, operas, museums, restaurants or sports grounds. Space began to be appreciated as a consumption object: for its *amenities* as explained by Edward Ullman (Ullman, E. 1954). A logic of *landscape prices* was combined with the logic of *land prices* that had until then ruled spatial organization.

### Considering social and cultural factors

Other social sciences analyzed also the spatial structure of societies. The relations between human beings were diverse: *family* was universally present; people cooperated to perform certain actions and form *associations*; they *exchange* what they produced; relations of *subordination* and *power* developed, creating *tribes*, *feudal* or *caste systems* or various types of *states* (Maquet, 1970). In the modern world, many activities were performed within *bureaucracies* – sociologists (Etzioni, 1964) prefer to speak of *organizations*, *private enterprises* or *public administrations*, in order to avoid the negative connotations of the first term.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, C. 1936) proposed in the 1930s a fascinating analysis of the social space of Bororo villages of Matto Grosso, in Brazil. The houses of women formed a circle around the club of men: the space belonging to

men, in the center, was opposed to the peripheric domain of women. But this circle was cut by two axes; the first one, approximately East-West, divided the phratries; the second one, perpendicular to the nearby rio Vermelho, was the limit between upstream and downstream clans. Three groups (regrouping the upper, middle and lower individuals) underlined the division of each clan in three classes: the superiors of a half clan married the superiors of the other one, the middle members of it the middle members of the other, etc.

Three dimensions of the Bororo social space were, in this way, inscribed upon the land and present behind the apparent simplicity of the circle of houses, as explained by Lévi-Strauss:

Here is a recapitulation of the main features of the Bororo society. We distinguished three of them, which consist: 1° in several types of dualism of a diametral type [...]; 2° in several types of dualism of a concentric type [...]; 3° in a triadic structure which operates a redistribution of clans in two endogamic classes (each one divided into two exogamic classes) ...” (Lévi-Strauss, 1958).

Historians and anthropologists showed how the networks of social relations took advantage of the material networks of transport and communication in order to structure social life: Italian bankers in the Middle Ages used, for instance, their relatives - uncles, brothers, sons - to operate the trading posts they had in the Flanders or the Eastern Mediterranean ports.

Geographers knew these analyses, but they did not fully integrate them in their approach. It was only with the cultural turn that their conception of space took into consideration the irrational and non-representational aspects of human nature, and the ensuing cultural construction of social space.

### THE CULTURAL TURN: A NEW CONCEPTION OF MAN AS A GEOGRAPHIC AGENT

Two interpretations of the earth surface as transformed by human beings are possible: i) for

some geographers, it is made of a collection of things and beings selected according to their usefulness, which means that they result from rational decisions; ii) for the others, this collection results from choices realized according to the habits and values (the culture) of the group, which means that an observer is unable to guess them. The cultural turn was a consequence of this fundamental change: the role of the geographer was no more to look at the world just in the same way as God, but to analyze the way individuals and groups observed, imagined, conceived and tried to shape it according to their interests and ideals. The cultural turn was thus conducive to a prodigious enlargement of the scope of geography and a new interest in the ways people perceive and imagine the world. Human beings ceased to be conceived as naturally equipped with a rational mind. They are shaped by the societies they belong to thanks to the culture they have received.

### **The enlargement of the geographic field**

Geography deals today with a deeply enlarged field. The functionalist approach tried to explain the way societies worked according mainly to an economic perspective. It stressed productive activities. It considered also power relations, but only those relative to States, their politics of domination and their armies.

Human geography was mainly interested in men, since they were responsible for productive tasks, when women were in charge with those of reproduction, which appeared less important. Attention was centered on male adults. It was among them that armies, responsible for the strength of nations, were recruited.

Geographers focused on commercial productions and neglected self-production, even if it was still dominant in many parts of the world. Commercial exchange was fully developed only in industrialized countries: as a consequence, white people were more studied than the others. Blacks, Indians or Chinese people were only mentioned where they worked in tropical plantations.

The breaking up with functionalism disrupts this conception of geography. Women, children and old persons are today considered as important

as male adults. There is a keen curiosity for dominated groups, dropouts and foreigners. The emerging world is as much valued than Western societies.

Mainly interested in productive activities, the geography of yesterday ignored the periods when economic life was disturbed by climatic catastrophes, cyclic crises or wars. Political geography dealt more with diplomacy and Empire building than with military conflicts. The deep poverty of whole populations was only mentioned as a picturesque element of many foreign countries.

Contemporary geography studies the feminine half of humanity, forgotten ages, non-productive people, victims of social exclusion or prisoners. It includes both the areas where societies appear as normal ones and the *heterotopia*, these counter-spaces they need, but where the rules normally enforced upon everyone are not applied. It is equally interested in prosperity and poverty. To the periods of happiness, it opposes the times of stress and doom; it delves on death and the different ways it is institutionalized.

The enlarged scope of geography covers all the aspects of the life and culture of human groups. The rational dimension of thought does not disappear, but an equal attention is devoted to the exploration of imaginaries, their variety, the preferences they create and the environments they contribute to shape. The analysis of feasts and leisure and the creation and management of scenery are added to that of productive activities.

### **The study of representations, imagination and imaginaries**

The enlargement of the discipline is conducive to a new emphasis on representations. Poststructuralism and the cultural approach deal with those that grew out of a sensitive perception of environment, its images and the narratives it induces. Landscapes appear as pleasant or trite. They often evoke other places and other times. Some are colored with joy, happiness and a sense of fulfilment. Others arouse in us feelings of gloom, nostalgia or fear. Dream changes them, magnifies some places, makes them desirable or fraught with terror and confer them the terrifying charm of sublime. All the images of

the same type provoke the same type of reaction. A photo of a white sand beach with palm trees is enough to give birth to a desire for rest and idleness. A view of long snowy slopes reminds us of the pleasure of skiing.

Travelers and writers describe the world and infuse it with their sensitivity. Photographs and cameramen choose the perspectives and lights that magnify places. The painter as well as the novelist rely on imaginary. It inspires the filmmaker. It is exploited by the developer of touristic spots and the tour operator trying to propose itineraries and sojourns adapted to the preferences of his customers. It motivates tourists in the choice of their destination. The scenery people are dreaming are sometimes transformed into brick and stone: Walt Disney's movies have given birth to Disneylands and Disneyworlds!

An essential form of imaginaries results in this way from the blending of human experience of the world with affective reactions. It shapes the way the World is perceived. People like to find the forms, colors, smells and sounds of their dreams in what they discover.

It is because tourism is now conceived for what it is really – an original way to consume space – that people are now able to understand its genesis and evolution. The *Géographies de Gauguin* (Staszak, 2003) by Jean-François Staszak is a wonderful illustration of this new approach.

### Models of man

The functional approaches dominated until the late 1960s. For them, human beings were naturally endowed with reason, which meant that their decisions were not dependent on local traditions: it gave women and men the capability to make choices independently of the local conditions and their own culture. With the cultural turn, the perspective changed. The inherited part of human capabilities is a small one. Their major part is transferred from person to person and generation to generation: culture plays a central part in the construction of human beings. What is passed down is made of three parts: i) practices and know-hows are largely duplicated by imitation – it is the non-representational part of culture. It was for a long

time ignored by geographers. Nigel Thrift (Thrift, 2007) showed its importance for the discipline; ii) reason is built through the transmission of rules of coherence, which means that even if it is conveyed by culture, it does not vary wholly from a person to the next one; iii) imagination relies on the transmission of information, but also on the sharing of emotions, which explains at the same time its fecundity and its variability.

Two interpretations of these processes have been developed during the cultural turn: the poststructuralist and the cultural ones. Their difference is rooted in their interpretation of the respective dynamics of intelligence and imagination in the passing down processes.

## POSTSTRUCTURALIST GEOGRAPHIES

The sixties and seventies were the time when the critical conception of science gave birth to philosophies of deconstruction, a continuation of the Frankfurt school of sociology of the interwar period. The movement was especially strong in France. Known as the *French theory* in the United States, it was influential during the eighties, the time when poststructuralist geographies appeared.

### Michel Foucault and discursive formations

The poststructuralist interpretation stresses the fact that the transmission of cultures is conditioned by those who spread information: they serve as models in the non-representational case; their narratives are organized in such a way that they encapsulate elements conducing to their automatic reproduction.

The ideas upon which poststructuralism relied were formulated between 1960 and 1980 by deconstructionist philosophers. In the case of narratives, the main authority was Michel Foucault in two of its major books (Foucault, 1966. Foucault, 1970): *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) and *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1970). His thesis was built on the conviction that the construction of knowledge was a three stages process: i) each language imposed a categorization of reality through the words it used; ii) the intermediary level, generally ignored

by social scientists, was the time when power and reason cooperated to formulate crude explanations; iii) the third level was the scientific one, when reason became dominant and presented coherent and rigorous explanations.

Foucault called *épistémès* the narratives produced at the intermediary level in *Les Mots et les choses* (Foucault, 1966). He named them *discursive formations* in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Foucault, 1970); they included elements he called *utterances* (*énoncés*). They had the property to be automatically duplicated when transmitted from one person to the next one. It meant that the groups who produced and diffused discursive formations imposed them on all the recipients.

Edward Said played a central role in the diffusion of Foucault's ideas: his book on *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) insured their universal success.

### **Pierre Bourdieu and *habitus***

For non-representational forms of passing down, Pierre Bourdieu used a notion first introduced by Aristoteles and developed by Thomas Aquinas who gave it the name of *habitus*; it was introduced into French sociology by Émile Durkheim at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through education and later forms of social intercourse, people integrate in their personality habits and reflexes, which make them act along patterns unconsciously imported.

Pierre Bourdieu was trained as a philosopher, worked for a time as an anthropologist in Algeria and was mainly known as a sociologist. From his research as an anthropologist, he drew the conviction that, in social sciences, the beliefs of the people under scrutiny had to be ignored. For what reason? Because the individuals were built through what they received from the others – through their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1979, 1980); behind them, society was the real actor.

Since *habitus* was passed down through education and the imitation of adults by children, people did not perceive it as something imposed upon them from outside. The process of incorporation was unconscious: individuals considered their beliefs as personal, when, in fact, they were produced by the ruling groups. Domination was in this way insured through a

unharmful and silent process.

The international influence of the ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu was strengthened by those of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and François Lyotard.

Instead of conceiving individuals as beings naturally endowed with reason, which meant that their characteristics were the same everywhere, poststructuralist geographers saw in them the product of a passing down process which equipped them with reflexes, know-hows, knowledge and beliefs produced by dominant groups. Individuals received in the same way symbols and emotional experiences, that nurtured their imagination and gave birth to shared imaginaries.

### **From processes of identification/ differentiation to matrices of domination**

In the poststructuralist perspective, the identity of human beings does not result from differences in their natural endowment: it is a social construction. A person feels close to a group; in order to be accepted by it, he stresses its differences with the others. This process is a cumulative one. At the end, others are often deprived from their humanity...

When two different groups enjoy similar positions in the social hierarchy, the process of identification/differentiation is a symmetrical one. When they occupy unequal positions, the upper groups formulate ideas and feelings and impose them on the lower one through the diffusion of *discursive formations* and *habitus*. These *matrices of domination* (Staszak, Debarbieux y Pieroni, 2017) are rooted in race, gender and class. (Claval, 2022)

Poststructuralist geographies insist in this way on the domination processes that give advantages i) to the civilizations, which are able to develop military as well as propaganda weapons – the Western world since the Renaissance mainly; ii) to men who subjugated and exploited women since the beginnings of mankind thanks to the patriarchal systems they built; iii) to the innovators who drove the industrial revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and imposed in this way the supremacy of capitalists over other classes.

Domination results from the use of force and physical constraint, the control of means

of production and, to a very large extent, the performative effects of narratives imagined by the ruling groups.

These geographies deconstruct the basis of the Western success in focusing on the forms of exploitation upon which it relied.

### **The revolutionary dimension of constructivism**

The interpretation of human beings developed by poststructuralism is a constructivist one: human bodies are conceived as the supports of social realities. Individuals do not exist by themselves. They always reflect external influences. It means that the human World is a conventional one. As it exists today, it reflects the dominance and power of minorities that shaped it to exploit most human beings to their own advantage.

As a result, many of today geographers conceive themselves as agents of a new revolution. Their aim is to build a society more equalitarian and respectful towards nature. They try to free human beings from the inequality of classes, from the chains of race and from the gender categories imposed by patriarchal societies: *queer* geographies are in this way instrumental in building social environments allowing for a liberation of sex.

In this sense, poststructuralist geographies are conceived as a tool for shaping a better world.

### **Subaltern geographies**

The poststructuralist movement is not only based on the deconstruction of dominant geographies. It explores spatial processes and realities that has been ignored until recently. In former colonies, geographers focused on the role of colonizers and the local elites cooperating with them. They did not deal with most population. In India, a movement developed from the sixties to show the role of most of the population during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was difficult to analyze, since official censuses were not centered on the bulk of population. Some archives existed, however, and through their systematic use, it was possible to build another interpretation of colonial societies. Indian scholars began to speak of subaltern studies.

These studies do not explore societies from the top. They start from the bottom and move up. They stress the role of peasants, handworkers, peddlers, small shopkeepers; they explore barter and different forms of economic solidarity. They are interested in religious movements.

They analyze the syncretism resulting from the intercourse between native and imported beliefs, religions or ideologies. In America, they focus on the different forms of Afro-American cults.

They offer an interpretation of societies and spatial organizations, which stresses the inventiveness of their lower and middle strata. They underline the forms of passive resistance to the prevailing order. They insist on the resilience of the popular milieus.

### **The space of poststructuralist geographies**

Poststructuralist geographers propose a new conception of human beings and their environmental relations. They do not focus exclusively on their productive activities, and are more open to the way they live and the diverse ways they experience their environment. Space is really lived, which means that people are sensitive to the sight, sounds and smells of the places they live in or visit. As a result, geographers begin to stress the role of sensitivity in the valuation of space.

Space is from then on characterized by the *spatial devices (dispositifs spatiaux)* it incorporates. In a sense, this expression is just a new way to name what was previously known as spatial or regional structures. But it stresses something which is new and essential: these structures are not natural features; they are manmade and conceived to achieve specific aims.

At the time of functional approach, space remained fundamentally an empirical reality made of natural features, human settlements and land uses. Space as analyzed by poststructuralist geographies is for the first time more social than physical and empirical. It is mainly conceived as a field of forces created by the matrices of domination. The domination is often a local one - local elites control the nearby lower social groups; it takes often the form of an opposition between a central place or area and peripheries. The

contemporary revolutions of rapid transportation and telecommunications modify this situation and give more weight to peripheric locations.

Social space juxtaposes zones of inclusion or exclusion, completely subjugated regions and points or areas of resilience and resistance. The nature of places changes from one area to the next one: Foucault called *heterotopia* the areas which were included within the boundaries of a group, but where different rules were applied.

### **The limits of the poststructuralist approach in geography**

Poststructuralism owes a part of its success to its critical dimension. It has also to be submitted to a critical analysis.

The postulates upon which rely the matrices of dominations are fragile. It is true as well of Foucault's discursive formations of as of Bourdieu's habitus.

Foucault's analysis of the diffusion of discursive formations is based on *utterances*, the elements which structured these narratives and explain the way their organization and content remained intact when passed down. But the utterance is an elusive notion and the *Archéologie du Savoir* a difficult and often obscure book. After 1975, Foucault ceased to stress the role of narratives in his analysis of power. He gave a very nuanced interpretation of their role in a later book:

A narrative has to be conceived as a set of discontinuous segments, the tactical function of which is neither uniform nor stable. More precisely, it is inconvenient to imagine a world of narratives divided between dominant narratives and the dominated ones; but rather as a multiplicity of discursive elements that may play a role in varied strategies. It is this distribution that it is important to reconstitute, with what it includes of implicit and explicit things, of required or forbidden utterances; with what it involves of different variants and effects according to who is speaking, his power position, the institutional context in which he is situated. [...] Narratives, no more than silences, are not once for all submitted to a power or set against it. A complex and unstable play has to be

supposed, in which the narrative may be at the same time and instrument and effect of power, but also an obstacle, a stopper, a point of resistance and of departure for an opposite strategy. The narrative vehicles and products power; it reinforces it, but also mines it, makes it an easy target for criticism and blocks its way (Foucault, 1976).

It appears impossible to build a matrix of dominance on so diverse an element!

Bourdieu's habitus may also be interpreted in different ways. It is true that human beings owe to their education the signs they use, the codes they mobilize and the attitudes they display: these elements come from their culture and is an expression of their social origin. It is also true that there are so naturally passed down from a generation to the next one that they are not perceived as coming from outside. But does it mean that they preclude any form of individual initiative? No: Bourdieu is perfectly explicit on this point: the translation he realized of Erwin Panofsky's *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique* offered him the possibility to discover another aspect of *habitus*:

“To oppose individuality and collectivity in order to better preserve the rights of creative individuality and the mysteries of the unique creation is to refuse to discover individuality under the disguise of culture – in the meaning of cultivation, of *Bildung* – or for speaking as Erwin Panofsky, under the shape of the *habitus* through which the creator is indebted to his collectivity and his time, and which orients and directs, without his own's knowledge, the apparently most unique creative acts” (Bourdieu, 1967).

For Bourdieu, the *habitus* was not fundamentally a process that deprived human beings from their creativity, but an argument to build a materialist conception of mankind:

“It is precisely the notion of *habitus*, which gives back to the human agent a generative, unifying and classifying power, when reminding at the same time that this capacity of building the social reality,

socially built itself, is not that of a transcendental subject, but that of the socialized human body” (Bourdieu, 1997).

The use by the poststructuralist approach of Foucault’s discursive formations or Bourdieu’s *habitus* went certainly well beyond what these authors intended. It was conducive to a systematic deconstruction of the core values of many societies. It put an excessive emphasis on matrices of domination: the resulting perspective offered to researchers the opportunity of exploring the effects of hierarchical structures, forms of power and control as well as subaltern geographies. At the same time, it deprived them from the curiosity to explore completely the whole range of communication, identification/differentiation processes and imaginaries: as a result, poststructuralism ignored a part of the ways culture weights on human distributions.

In the field of social sciences, an approach is never permanently and universally critical: as far as it offers a new perspective on reality, it reveals previously ignored defects and weaknesses, but a new shift of point of view is needed in order to renew this effect after a time.

## THE PURE CULTURAL APPROACH

The pure cultural approach in geography is akin to the structuralist one. Both of them resulted from the cultural turn of the discipline. Both of them display a new curiosity for representations and imaginaries. They share a much-enlarged scope and an interest in cultural processes, either communication or distinction ones. They differ mainly in respect to the autonomy they recognize to human beings. The structuralist approach stresses the role of control and domination. The cultural approach do not ignore them, but do not judge them present everywhere: they cannot be inferred exclusively through the invocation of narratives formations or *habitus*; their role has, in each case, to be more thoroughly documented.

As a result, the cultural approach differs from the poststructuralist one: its glance takes in social

realities from its sides and not from above or below; it brings to light other aspects.

## Processes of communication

The cultural approach is attentive to the influence of media on communication. It insists also on the formation of opinion.

1- In primitive societies, transmission occurred directly through what people saw and listened to. These processes had a short range: a few meters only. All the elements of a culture were passed down in this way within a local circle. The situation was different in historic societies. Most people were still unable to write and read, which meant that their culture remained local: as a consequence, the forms of daily life and productive technics changed over short distances. Upper classes were partly relying on oral communication, but they were up to a point literate. It meant that the social technics and religious beliefs they shared were spread over large areas. In this way, these groups imposed their political power and doctrinal modes of religiosity (Whitehouse, H. 2004) on lower classes, but were unable to get them rid of the deeply rooted popular forms of their more spectacular and older forms of religiosity.

The situation changed with the printing press and the growing literacy it allowed. It took another character with the modern medias, able to transfer instantly at any distance sounds, images and films. Popular cultures of the past were replaced by mass cultures – and later on, with Internet and the cellular phones, by a proliferation of cultures of niche. At the same time, the technical progress gave to elites a new mastery of productive processes. People were overwhelmed by information, with no control of its content: it was the time of fake news.

2- Communication did not serve only to pass down information unilaterally. It was also made of dialogs and the ensuing formation of shared or opposite opinions. Dialogs were open to everyone in primitive societies as well as in the popular components of the traditional ones. Where communication began to rely on writing, a large part of it took a hierarchical form, which left little room for the development of a public opinion. The printing press and the mail services modified this

situation: intellectual and political elites discussed new ideas in the new tea rooms or coffee-shops, or by mail. These exchanges produced shared opinions. Their form and content were controlled by editors and publishers and then diffused by journals or books. The existence of a public opinion of this type was a necessary condition for the smooth functioning of democracies. Since the contents of the news diffused by the new social medias escaped until now to any control, a more unstable form of public opinion is becoming dominant and explains the rise of illiberal democracies.

### **Processes of identity/distinction and competition for status**

The cultural approach does not focus only on communication processes. It offers new perspectives in the fields of identity building and social forms of competition.

Social competition has not always as aim to sort out those who are members of a group and those who are excluded. It may also tend to distinguish individuals within a group according to the way they conform to its values. In a religious society, it is important to live more completely the shared faith and appear more charitable than the others. In a society based on martial values, it is good to train oneself as a warrior and display courage and heroism. In an artistic society, it is through their creativity that some writers, painters or musicians outmatch the others. In a group centered on science, it is through her (or his) outstanding results in the field of research that a woman or a man wins prestige.

Social competition is not based only on economic or power targets. Its aim is also to win *consideration* from others and enjoy, as a result, a desirable *status*. It is one of the main differences between the structuralist and cultural approaches. The first one remains akin to functional approaches as far as it stresses mainly the role of competition for power and wealth. The second one considers another form of competition, the aim of which is not to control or exploit the others, but to gain their support.

Introducing in this way a third mechanism of social competition means that the whole discipline has to be restructured: economic competition is

rarely a pure one, since its aim is often to gain a higher *status* rather than to enjoy a higher income; power position is always a complex one, since it combines the use of force and physical constraint and the supervision of others on one side, and the respect of *authority* on the other. As a result, the social divisions within a society are not only based on income and power, i. e. on socio-economic classes, but also on prestige and status.

The functional approaches of early human geographies were conceived for the emerging societies of their time. They were unable to explain the feudal or caste societies of the past, as well as the post-modern societies. The poststructuralist approach is useful to explain the weaknesses of the functional societies of yesterday and plead for societal reforms, but it is unable to propose efficient tools in order to organize today societies and their space.

Social competition is not only motivated by the search for the objective factors that are power and wealth. It is linked to the images that women and men give of themselves, to the roles they play and to the *visibility* they win in this way. The social space that human geography explores is a *theater* where individuals try to be acknowledged by the others; they wish to exist for them, to compel others' recognition by their *prestige* and win in this way an envied *status* and the *authority* it insures.

Space is not only an *arena* where people compete for wealth or power: they struggle also for *fame*. Space ceases to be only analyzed in terms of *fertility*, *accessibility* and *amenity*. It is valued in terms of *visibility*, that resulting from direct contacts and face-to-face relations as well as that conveyed by written texts an images and, with an increased efficiency, the modern technologies of communication.

### **The imaginaries of other worlds**

Imaginaries show that spatial organization is not ruled only by economic competition and politic power. Space is appreciated for its beauty and harmony, the serenity of many landscapes or the emotion arising from the bursting out of natural forces. It is valued since it is fashionable: it is important to live in some places and to avoid

other places, cities or regions. The French historian Michelet (Michelet, 1966/1833) gave in this way a psychological interpretation of the geography of 19<sup>TH</sup> century France, each region contributing by its moral virtues to the personality of the country. In a similar way, Delissen (2004) underscores the weight held by moral considerations in the regional organization of space in pre-modern Korea.

The cultural approach in geography shares with the poststructuralist one a curiosity for the way imagination transforms the representations of landscapes, the people who inhabit or visit them, and their atmospheres.

There is, however, another form of imaginary. It does not picture, poetize and load with emotion the face of the earth. It builds other worlds. The poststructuralist approach does not focus on it since it is not rooted in material evidence.

Human spirit has the faculty to imagine things with no material existence. Their building either relies on the logical and controlled capacities of reason or on the power of imagination. Philosophers speak of the transcendental dimensions of human spirit: metaphysics explore the significance of the transcendent or immanent objects built in this way. Geographers have to consider them, since these imagined spheres play an essential role in organizing human activity.

One of the fundamental lessons of political geography is the following one: an idea is all the more valued because it comes from sources located faraway in space or in the past, the present or the future. The authority of the spectacular forms of religiosity (Whitehouse, 2004) (the religions of myth) was rooted in the distant past of the immemorial. The authority of the doctrinal forms of religiosity came from the celestial source of the Revelation. The authority of the rational forms of religiosity (i. e. metaphysics) was associated with the transcendental dimension of human reason (Claval, 2022). A new form of religiosity, ideology, appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Claval, 1980, 2008). Its sources were terrestrial, but located in a Golden Age of the past, a Land without Evil of the present or a Utopia of the future, the three of them being out of reach of contemporary human beings; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

the other spaces produced by human minds were increasingly located in the unconscious dimensions of nature, economy or language.

The other worlds are permeated with values, which do not exist naturally in the reality we observe. Their role is to provide human societies with ethical models they are unable to build out of the observation of empirical things. It is because human beings have the capability to imagine other worlds that they are able to build a social space permeated with values.

Social space is not a natural one. It is a social construction. It is built through rituals and ceremonies transforming the ordinary space of nature into a valued one. The human beings who evolve in this world are twice born: from the womb of their mother and through baptism and other rites of passage which integrate them into the society. As soon as they have an impact on the organization and functioning of a society, human relations are also institutionalized.

It is for that reason that the nature of social space is not the same according to places or areas. There are sacred spaces where the immemorial or celestial worlds of myth or revelation are encroaching on the earth surface, or quasi-sacred space where the Golden Age, the Land without Evil and Utopia are in some way present. The *heterotopias* of Foucault are incorporated in the social space in another way: they are parts of it, but the moral rules normally effective everywhere are there ignored.

The imaginary of other worlds explains how values are introduced into terrestrial affairs and create in this way a social sphere -sphere of values.

Because we are living in a world where people attribute different values to nature, landscapes, social institutions and institutions, the ways geographical research is organized has to change completely. What is asked from a geographer is not to cast a glance as keen as God's one on environments and social groups. It is to analyze the glances cast upon their surroundings, their region, their nation and the World by the populations he is studying. He has to be modest: he ceases to be the creator of a universal geography; he is the translator of a multiplicity of lived geographies – which have sometimes a universal dimension.

Such orientations show that the cultural approach opens to our discipline areas until then reserved to philosophers – the field of ontology in particular.

### The dynamics of accomplishment

The cultural approach manifests a strong interest in the competition for prestige: this one is often based on the pursuit of types of achievements that are at the same time social and personal. In competing for status, the individual conforms his behavior to an ethical ideal and accumulate in this way a moral capital. It gives a significance to his life and orients it toward a target.

As a result, geography is partly shaped by the efforts of people to carry out feats and confer exemplarity to their life: it is, in a way, the sum of myriads of individual achievements.

The geographical marks of the pursuit of achievement were already studied by Greek geographers (Strabo, Denys of Alexandria) or touristic guides (Pausanias) as well as by Arabic geographers (Ibn Battuta).

### CONCLUSION

The cultural approach develops an interest in all the cultural processes: those that are characterized by the rigor of reason as well as those relying on the facilities of imagination and giving birth to imaginaries of other worlds.

It delves on the moral and normative dimension of the human world, which results from the institution of the cosmos, nature, human beings, society, social institutions and space, and notes the universality of this process. The building of celestial or unconscious other worlds is inherent to the capacities of human mind and the role of communication.

It considers the striving of human groups for surpassing themselves or suppressing a part of their deep instincts. It shows the role of the anti-worlds built on repressed drives – and thus explains the structure of heterotopias.

It considers the dynamics of individual and collective accomplishments.

It does not ignore the dynamics of domination, exploitation and exclusion, which are central to the structuralist approach, but questions their generality. It deconstructs a part of its pretensions.

It provokes a complete restructuration of the whole discipline.

It shows that cultural geography deals more specifically with the way human representations and imaginaries are confronted with the materiality of nature and the corporeality of human beings, as underlined by Jean-Marc Besse (Besse, J.-M. 2019).

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