Phenomenology and Social Geography
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Phenomenology and social geography

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Summary. *Increasing geographical interest in phenomenological approaches has tended to ignore their implicit individualistic bias. An attempt to reconcile the valuable insights of phenomenology with the traditional focus of social geography on group behaviour is made with particular reference to the work of Park and Durkheim.*

Considerable interest has been expressed in recent years over the relevance of phenomenological perspectives in geography as a possible alternative to the dominance of positivism throughout the social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s.[1] Fewer efforts have been directed towards reconciling the apparently individualistic nature of phenomenology with the traditional *group approach* of social geography (cf. Jones and Eyles, 1977). Among those who have considered non-positivistic alternatives in geography are Mercer and Powell (1972), Gregory (1978a, 1978b) and Smith (1979). Relph (1970) has attempted a more formalised inquiry into the relations between phenomenology and geography, and Entrikin (1976) has provided to my mind the most serious consideration of phenomenological ideas in relation to contemporary geographical ' humanism ', in contrast to the rather diffuse speculations of Yi-Fu Tuan (1971, 1974, 1976, etc.). Several authors have focused on the phenomenological experience of geographical space (e.g. Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977a; Buttimer and Seamon (eds), 1980). But while Seamon's (1979) attempt to write *A geography of the lifeworld* in terms of movement, rest and encounter acknowledges the value of ' group inquiry as a phenomenological method ', Wilson (1980) is virtually alone in attempting to link his work with conventional social geography, in this case through the school of symbolic interaction. Despite Relph's recent claim (1981) that ' phenomenology is not a method that can be applied simply to existing geographical topics ' nor one which has ' immediate practical value to society ', this paper aims to consider the possibility and desirability of incorporating phenomenological insights into social geography.

To date, the most conscientious attempts to apply the spirit of phenomenological philosophy to social geography have been made by Buttimer (1969, 1974, 1976) and by Ley (1977, 1978). Both writers would no doubt agree that positivism entered social geography via the founding father of urban ecology, R. E. Park, who once speculated:

> Reduce all social relations to relations of space and it would be possible to apply to human relations the fundamental logic of the physical sciences (Park, 1926; reprinted in Peach (ed.), 1975, 27).

In their haste to apply Park's postulated equation of spatial and social distance (' human relations can always be reckoned, with more or less accuracy, in terms of distance ') geographers tended to gloss over Park's concurrent declaration of a commitment to study the city's moral order. Sociologists were more perceptive and Ralph Turner (1967), for example, has even argued that ' Park is on the side of *Verstehen* sociology as opposed to positivistic approaches ' (see also Jackson and Smith, 1981). Similarly, Durkheim has commonly been accused of subverting the course of social

science by encouraging its positivist phase. His posited connection between a society's ' moral density ' and its ' material density ' is clearly parallel to Park's physical/social distance formulation:

> Moral density cannot grow unless material density grows at the same time, and the latter can be used to measure the former (Durkheim, 1933, 257).

But there is ample evidence that Durkheim, like Park, conceived of society as a ' moral order ' (see, in particular, Durkheim, 1933, 398–401).

Although Durkheim's ' social morphology ' may have been historically more influential than the alternative Vidalian ' géographie humaine ', the contrasts have been exaggerated (see Berdoulay, 1978). Buttimer (1971, 40), in particular, has drawn attention to the lively *va-et-vient* between the two men. More recently, Entrikin (1980) has demonstrated the roots of Park's urban ecology in neo-Kantian philosophy and Comtean positivism. In the same essay, however, Park's sympathies with a Vidalian conception of regional geography are demonstrated, in keeping with his contrast between idiographic human geography and nomothetic human ecology. Thus, according to Park, geographers describe the facts of location, while human ecologists discover underlying principles used to interpret and compare the facts. Park's identification as one of the intellectual predecessors of contemporary positivistic urban social geography is thus shown to be both understandable and somewhat ironic.

Reactions to an exclusively positivist human geography have tended to take the form of an often ill-defined ' humanistic ' critique which is frequently confused with a more strictly phenomenological approach.[2] Neil Smith has deplored this fundamental confusion, which he likens to the confusion of Marxism and radical geography (cf. Folke, 1972). He considers humanistic geography to be only an *attitude* while phenomenology is more specifically a *method* (Smith, 1979, 366–7).[3]

To date, ' humanistic ' geography has achieved little more than a critique of some of the grosser excesses of positivism. Rarely has it advanced to the extent of providing substantive examples from empirical applications. The collection of essays edited by Ley and Samuels (1978) are representative: strong on ' epistemological orientations ' but progressively weaker in indicating the ' methodological implications ' of humanistic geography and in illustrating ' some research directions '. In a later paper (Ley, 1980), this qualitative imbalance is maintained, with an impressive historical survey of the dehumanising of human geography and of the epistemological, theoretical, existential and moral errors of conventional geographical research, but with only a single example of the kind of research which might follow from the adoption of a humanistic approach, taken from Ley's earlier published account of the black inner city in Philadelphia, based on experiential evidence collected in the field (Ley, 1974).

Phenomenology has therefore been described as a form of criticism rather than a full blown alternative to the scientific approach (Entrikin, 1976). Billinge (1977) goes further, however, describing phenomenology disparagingly as ' negativism ', questioning the methodological purity of the particular strand of non-positivist ideology which has entered the annals of geographical literature and casting aspersions on the ' superficial parallels ' between phenomenology and historical geography. He draws attention to problems of implementation, as ' phenomenology is a contemplative philosophy and by no means one of praxis ' and attempts to separate phenomenology as philosophy from phenomenology as method.

What possibility exists of reconciling the insights of philosophical phenomenology on the subjective nature of experience with a Durkheimian emphasis on the intrinsi-

cally social nature of that experience? As early as 1972, Mercer and Powell argued that non-positivist movements in the social sciences (history, geography and sociology) ' have paid their way handsomely, and are unquestionably well founded on coherent and highly reputable philosophical premises ' (Mercer and Powell, 1972, 48). What, then, has retarded the application of phenomenological perspectives in the field of social geography?

It has been said that phenomenology cannot easily be summarised (Relph, 1977). Despite considerable disagreement over the exact nature of the philosophy, however, the same author argues that most phenomenologists would agree on at least three basic issues: the importance of man's ' lived world ' of experience; an opposition to the dictatorship and absolutism of scientific thought over all other forms of thinking; and an attempt to formulate some alternative method of investigation to that of hypothesis testing and the development of theory (Relph, 1970). Phenomenology, as exemplified in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1939), has been described as a method and not a system of philosophy (Entrikin, 1976), involving the suspension of preconceptions and aiming to expose the underlying *essences* of phenomena (i.e. the necessary features of experience). Phenomenology can thus be defined philosophically as the ' science of essences ', striving for ' a presuppositionless return to the things themselves '. The emphasis is placed on the *intentionality* of man's actions and, as Relph argues,

> It follows from the concept of intentionality that there is no single, objective world; rather there is a plurality of worlds—as many as there are attitudes and intentions of man (1970, 194).

This focus on the subjectivity of experience seems to be the most attractive feature of the phenomenological perspective for social geography, although, in criticising the ' extravagant and misleading interpretations ' of humanism and phenomenology in the work of Yi-Fu Tuan and Anne Buttimer, Relph (1977) warns that phenomenology is not just an excuse for subjectivity, nor does it allow straightforward combinations with existing geographical concepts. Yi-Fu Tuan (1976) attempted such a combination in making the distinction between place and space, arguing that place cannot be completely understood from the ' outside ', as an assemblage of facts, objects and events. Knowledge of a place involves understanding the sentiments and meanings attached by the ' insider ':

> The social sciences acquire knowledge of the human world by examining social institutions, which can be viewed both as examples of human inventiveness and as forces limiting the free activity of individuals (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1976, 266).

Buttimer (1974, 24) has also made constructive use of the insider/outsider distinction in understanding the social world in terms of meanings which are relevant to the actors themselves.

The premise that every object is an object *for a subject* is similarly basic to Ley's (1977) understanding of the social geography of the taken-for-granted world. It is clear that the attempt to ' enter into the life situations of different peoples, and [to] try to reconstruct their ideas and images of their own situations ' is a difficult project to realise within the positivistic framework of the ' scientific method '. Buttimer (1974, 21) considers the Weberian concept of *Verstehen* (empathetic, comprehensive understanding) to be a preferable alternative to *Wissen* (lawful knowledge). However, it is not difficult to appreciate the reservations which empirically-minded social scientists have in accepting the phenomenological notion that knowledge can be based upon intuition (Entrikin, 1976; see also Berger and Luckman, 1966). Billinge (1977), for

example, complains that, at the practical level, phenomenology does not incorporate any notion of validity as there is no basis for comparison, and Walmsley (1974) condemns the whole phenomenological enterprise as ' characteristically non-empirical '.

But perhaps the most serious objection to the application of phenomenological notions to social geography is the apparent tendency of phenomenological philosophy to concentrate on individual meanings and perceptions. For example,

> Husserl's work was exclusively concerned with the individual and the way the individual comes to gain knowledge of his world (Mercer and Powell, 1972, 17–18).

Yi-Fu Tuan's (1974) ' humanistic perspective ' also characterises phenomenology's concern with meaning as tending to imply personal experience in which the effect of the presence of other persons is left out of account. Walmsley (1974) even considers that phenomenology may be only applicable to that part of geography which deals with individual behaviour. This kind of reductionism cannot be acceptable to social geography as as a truly *social* science, following Durkheim, which seeks to understand and communicate accurately generalised collective representations. Durkheim was particularly outspoken in declaring the inadmissability for sociology of psychological reductionism:

> the substance of social life cannot be explained by purely psychological factors, i.e. by the states of the individual consciousness (Durkheim, 1938, xlix);

> every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false (ibid., 104);

> A purely psychological explanation of social facts cannot fail to allow all that is characteristic (i.e. social) in them to escape (ibid., 107); hence,

> *The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness* (ibid., 110, italicised in the original).

Phenomenology does, however, have useful lessons for the social geographer and the impossibility of its wholesale adoption does not mean that one need fall back by default on an unacceptable positivism. Phenomenology and positivism are, after are all, not mutually exclusive alternatives; the former can indeed build critically on the latter (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1976).

Various possibilities have been suggested for building a phenomenological approach which is genuinely social. Gregory (1978b), for example, reconsiders the claim that phenomenology is not a practical philosophy by way of Alfred Schutz's ' constitutive phenomenology ' (Schutz, 1932), which is also the basis for Ley's (1978) theory of social action. The notion of ' intersubjectivity ' is also fundamentally social. In Buttimer's essay on the dynamism of ' lifeworld ' for example, the phenomenological position is formulated in the following way:

> Whereas the subjective mode concentrates on unique individual experience, and the objective mode seeks generalisation and testable propositions concerning aggregate human experience, the ' intersubjective ' or phenomenological mode would endeavor to elicit a dialogue between individual persons and the ' subjectivity ' of the world (Buttimer, 1976, 282; see also Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974, 277–8).

As Walmsley puts it,

> human geographers face the problem of accounting for a great range in the scale of behaviour under study, not only in the spatial sense but also along a continuum of aggregation from individual to societal behaviour, (Walmsley, 1974, 104).

In attempting to provide a neo-positivist bridge between positivism and phenomenology, therefore, Walmsley considered the ideas of ' neighbourhood ', ' territory ' and ' quality of life ' to be important phenomenological concepts in the urban context, being experiential rather than factual.

Others have recognised the problems implicit in Husserl's preoccupation with the individual. Mercer and Powell, for example, point out that Husserl's followers, Alfred Vierkandt and Max Scheler, were concerned ' to break down the intellectual insularity of the " isolated ego " and [to] stress that as members of society our own existence is continually affirmed by the presence of " others " ' . . .

> ' Society ' is . . . not a thing ' out there ' but the outcome (more precisely, an on-going ' process ') of the interactions of individuals who ' work out ' mutual actions and meanings (Mercer and Powell, 1972, 18).

It is from this understanding of phenomenology that they come to recommend participant observation as an appropriate method to focus on ' situation ', ' transaction ' and ' interaction ' (ibid., 28–29). ' Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld ' phenomenologically, in Buttimer's terms, thus involves a process of translating the signs and symbols of other groups, grasping empathetically the motivational meaning of their actions (Buttimer, 1976).

Finally, however, one must return to the various different phenomenological perspectives outlined by Entrikin (1976). Here, he distinguishes between phenomenology, existentialism and existential phenomenology, arguing that it is the existential phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Sartre) who have most effectively reinterpreted Husserl's thought, abandoning his idealist tendencies. The combination of the phenomenological method with the importance of understanding man in his existential world makes existential phenomenology more important for social science than either philosophy alone. Similarly, another geographer who has attempted to interpret human geography's concern with socially organised space in a phenomenological perspective did so with reference to existential anthropology:

> [the] so-called " spatial order " in fact is a societal order, which can be interpreted only as a social product resulting from the complex interplay of human perceptions, objectives and capacities, institutional rules and material conditions connected with human and physical material substance in space (Van Paassen, 1976, 333).

This statement admirably outlines the possibilities of incorporating phenomenological insights into social geography through an analysis of the spatial structure of social relations. Such an approach has already been adopted by a number of social anthropologists (e.g. in Mitchell's (1970, 1974) work on ' situational ethnicity ' and in Barth's (1969) ' transactional ' approach to the study of ethnic groups and boundaries). Social geographers (e.g. Jackson, 1980a; Smith, 1981) are gradually coming to see the relevance of this work, marrying a Durkheimian awareness of the importance of the social with a phenomenological perspective on the contextual specificity of individual meanings. It is through just such a combination that a more broadly based cultural content to social geography (cf. Jackson, 1980b) may be achieved.

Notes

1. Positivism is here defined as the assumption that it is valid to apply the methods of natural science to the study of human behaviour (cf. Aron, 1968; Gregory, 1978a).
2. See, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1976). The distinction between phenomenological and humanistic approaches is discussed in the exchange between Relph (1977), Yi-Fu Tuan (1977b) and Buttimer (1977).
3. Relph has recently described the phenomenological method as involving ' the investigation and description of the world as we experience it directly and immediately ', requiring that ' we break down ingrained habits of seeing and thinking and attempt to see things as though for the first time, with as little prejudice and as few assumptions about them as possible ' (Relph, 1981, 105).

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Geography and higher education in the United Kingdom 1981

A report on the Joint Committee for Geography in Higher Education.

Many members of the Institute may be unaware that it has a Sub Committee on Geography in Higher Education and that since 1972 this Sub Committee has met together with the Geographical Association's Higher Education Section Committee. In recent years this ' Joint Committee ' has also had representatives on it from the National Conference of Geography in Higher Education and the Royal Geographical Society. During the 1970s, under the chairmanships of successively J. A. Patmore and R. Lawton, it considered and reported on a number of important, often urgent but almost always isolated issues. Whilst it continues to consider and report on specific matters referred to it by its parent bodies, the ' Joint Committee ' now feels the need to monitor a wider range of issues and developments within the framework of geography in higher education.

More than ever before the numerical strength, intellectual content and public assessment of geography reflect the interplay not only of academic factors and educational policies but also of a complex and rapidly changing set of social and governmental forces. Monitoring *The Times* during the first three months of 1981 isolated almost thirty items which seemed to have implications for the future well-being of geography in higher education, even though the subject was not explicitly mentioned in any of them. For example will the impact of the Department of Education and Science's *The school curriculum* (March 1981), containing a recommendation on the core curriculum to the effect that all secondary school pupils up to the age of 15 should study mathematics, science, English, religious education, physical education and *a humanities* subject, reduce the proportion of pupils taking geography at O-level? If so, what will be the implications for standards of achievement at that level and how might it influence the quality of pupils electing to study geography at 16–19 years and beyond? By focusing on the issues arising from reduced numbers in the age group will the Local Authority Associations' *Education for 16–19 year olds* (the Macfarlane Report of January 1981) encourage the trend towards sixth form colleges at the expense of traditional sixth forms? If so, will their growth restrict the range of subjects taught