

Torsten Hägerstrand and social theory

Nigel Thrift

Division of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Oxford,
Oxford OX1 3PD, UK

I Introduction

I am not sure that Torsten Hägerstrand ever thought that he would have a major impact on social theory. Indeed, he has sometimes been painted as an accidental social theorist. But I am equally sure that he made an important contribution to the development of social theory through being one of the first to hold a particular view of its powers and possibilities, one which wanted to bring it down to earth. In this, one might well argue, he showed considerable prescience.

I first met Torsten Hägerstrand in the 1970s on a visit to Lund. He was, as always, charming and considerate, sounding more hesitant than I had expected for someone who was already regarded as a global authority, mainly by dint of his work on diffusion. By that time, he had already worked out and applied most of the elements of 'time-geography'. In doing so, he had produced one of the few truly home-grown geographical social theories. Yet he certainly had not started from scratch. As a number of authors have made clear, Hägerstrand's work resulted from a number of theoretical and practical influences, including a touch of Heidegger, but Hägerstrand had certainly used his peripherality to produce a new and extraordinary mix which I want to examine in some detail.

II Time-geography in social theory

Within the history of social theory, time-geography has been influential on a number of

dimensions. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s it was taken up for itself as a contribution to 'spatializing' social theory. For those at the time who were looking to do social theory as something rather more than ethnomethodology and something less than the great slab-sided social theory supertankers like Marxism, it provide a gathering point to discuss all manner of issues. Most especially, it made it possible to talk about distinct events without simply falling back into the unembellished certainties of the empirical realm (e.g. Giddens, 1979). In that sense, Hägerstrand's work foreshadowed all the current work on the push of the event, but did so without relapsing into the kinds of romanticism that that work is sometimes prone to.

I think, however, that time-geography always offered rather more than was taken from it. It promised – and still promises – a series of boons to social theorists, of which I will mention just five. First, it provides a sense of concreteness, of the power of 'thereness', and it does so in a way – visually – that is still the preserve of too few social theorists. All those intricate diagrams were, in part, an attempt to describe the pragmatics of events, a theme which has now, in the work of writers like Deleuze, become fashionable in the social sciences and humanities but, at the time at which Hägerstrand was working, tended to be restricted to the field of philosophy, except for the work of social interactionists and ethnomethodologists which was

often very imperfectly understood by other than a relatively small coterie of enthusiasts. Secondly, Hägerstrand's work was an attack on the Durkheimian idea that space and time were social categories, collective representations which both derived from society and also dictated to society. Quite rightly, Hägerstrand was uncomfortable with this view, which arises from Durkheim's attempt to promote sociological analysis to the level of metaphysics by identifying collective representations of space and time with Kantian categories. Hägerstrand has often been described as a physicalist because of his scepticism over this move. I prefer to see him as an early critic of social constructionism, producing a critique of the kind now most often associated with the work of a rediscovered Tarde and, latterly, Latour. In particular, as Gell (1992) has made clear in a much neglected but extraordinarily significant book, time-geography makes it possible to go beyond social constructionism by emphasizing the physical constraints on human action and the wider networks of competing opportunities that they set up which act to steer situations. It therefore goes beyond the dispositional approaches to social space and time that are currently in vogue¹ by pointing to the importance of objects as means of expanding 'alternative-worldsness', as Gell puts it. Thirdly, and as a directly related point, those time-geographic diagrams did something else too. They radically lessened the distinction between humans and other objects. They provided a kind of neutrality of representation, even a democracy of description, of the world. Once again, Hägerstrand proved to be before his time in relating a story of how the world is which has now become common as a result of the spread of various approaches gleaned from social studies of science.

Fourthly, Hägerstrand's work espoused a geographical ethics, centred on the wise use of space and time. Although Hägerstrand would often use economic metaphors to describe that wisdom in the use of space and

time, I am sure that he meant something broader and more encompassing which it seems to me to be well worth keeping hold of, a kind of democratic ethos of the cardinal dimensions, a conviviality in the use of space and time (Gilroy, 2004). Fifthly, Hägerstrand provided a language which could register the world in different ways. Perhaps one way of *looking* at Hägerstrand's work is as a means of saying 'hello' in a language many can understand: drawing as a kind of visual Esperanto. In other words, it is possible to argue that Hägerstrand was trying to provide a distinct *aesthetic*. 'Aesthetic' may seem an odd term to use but I think it is the right one. Rather like one of Gell's famous (1996; 1998) fish traps, time-geographic diagrams draw you in through a quietist creativity (in contrast to the prevailing Euro-American idea that artistic effort has to be activist to be effective), trapping you in their nets. What they represent is a dynamic world in a world, rather like the computer game *The Sims*. One of the joys of time-geography is retracing the steps by which that world has come into existence, twisting them off course perhaps. One of the most important aspects of geography as a practice has always been its use of a wide variety of visual cues, not just print but also maps, diagrams and photographs, a sort of filmic leaf litter. Time-geography took this trait farther than most: Hägerstrand's aesthetic seemed to me to come from the days when many lecturers still drew on boards as they went along, rather like mathematicians deriving equations. It was a dynamical teaching style which is now nearly lost.²

There is still wonderful work going on in time-geography as evidenced by, for example, Mei-Po Kwan's automated graphics of the life paths of women in space-time (Kwan, 2002). But I would want to look elsewhere for inspiration now. If I was wanting to point to Hägerstrand's successor, it would be the artist Julie Mehretu who comes most readily to mind (Hesanmi, 2003). Why might this be?

III The long hello

Hägerstrand was brought up in the old Sweden, still rural, still ethnically relatively homogeneous, still relatively slow-moving: the Sweden of 'Path and diorama'. Since then, however, Sweden has become a much more cosmopolitan country (about one-fifth of its population now have 'foreign backgrounds'), reaching out to the world through bridgehead cosmopolitan cities like Malmö,³ and, like so many other places, captured by the dictates of automobility (Thrift, 2004). If there is a sign of this new world, it is probably the Öresund bridge opened in 2000. The bridge's span effectively connects Malmö with Kobenhavn and it seems to encapsulate so many themes, all the way from the effort to produce a new transnational world region with the bridge as its symbolic and practical centre, through the constant drone of flights making their way into and out of Kobenhavn airport, to the life paths of couples who have fallen foul of Denmark's new immigration laws and who have often fetched up in Malmö.

No doubt, this is a difficult world for some older Swedes (and not a few younger ones either; see Pred, 2001) to fathom, producing the kind of regret and nostalgia typified by Henning Mankel's glum detective, Kurt Wallander, who continually bemoans how bad things have become in Sweden since his youth while moving (mainly by car) through a series of encounters into which the rest of the world constantly and sometimes violently intrudes, in which a global geography is continually coming home to roost, so to speak. At the same time, Mankel's detective novels also suggest a different kind of time-geography, one which is less local and more connected into the world.

What, then, of newer Swedes? How might they picture the world? Rather like Mehretu's work, I think. In a series of vibrant paintings, Mehretu has tried to picture the contemporary urban, transnational world as a riot of lines, flows and grids, each in constant movement, pressing against each other,

rather like a Deleuzian field trip (Bonta and Protevi, 2004). Paintings like drawings, drawings like paintings. Layers and lines that build spaces and paces. A kind of mark-up language which, just like a language, is perpetually in development, perpetually assaying its own axioms.

Here, in these paintings, I think we see much of the same time-geographical aesthetic of both enormous scale and minute detail taken up and reworked, the big picture as made up of small narratives that constantly disappear into the larger context of the whole. Paintings that insist that you focus on parts but still see the whole. The air as ground (Irigaray, 2002). Time-geography in a world of flows. A new kind of way of saying 'hello' to the world, one which, in its own way, is just as organic as that valley in the inner woodlands of southern Sweden. 'The drawing has agency, in a way, as does any natural occurrence' (Mehretu, 2003).

What I am trying to point to, in other words (and paintings), is the way in which the spirit of Hägerstrand's work still lives on in a social theory that itself is being transfigured. Hägerstrand has left behind a vibrant legacy of authors and artists still trying to work out what there is there, still trying to work out what reach might reach into, still trying to work out the ethical dynamics of the cosmopolitan moment, still trying to touch the feral beauty of social life.

Notes

1. Which, I think it is possible to argue, are still too often touched by a phenomenological tradition which makes it difficult for them to appreciate the wider world (see, most recently, Morris, 2004).
2. Torsten Hägerstrand's aesthetic also came out of a Swedish structure of feeling of a particular kind, a sense of order and exactness exemplified by the wide availability of detailed population data which provided a model of Swedish population at the micro-scale and in the large, and a model of good government in which all citizens were registered and

locatable, a kind of minor key geodemographics but with the crucial constraint that it was considered in bad taste to know it all.

3. Which is only a few kilometres from Lund, of course.

References

- Bonta, M. and Protevi, J.** 2004: *Deleuze and geophilosophy. a guide and glossary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gell, A.** 1992: *The anthropology of time. cultural constructions of temporal maps and images*. Oxford: Berg.
- 1996: Vogel's net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps. *Journal of Material Culture* 1, 15–38.
- 1998: *Art and agency. An anthropological theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Giddens, A.** 1979: *Central problems in social theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Gilroy, P.** 2004: *After empire. melancholia or convivial culture?* London: Routledge.
- Hesanmi, O.** 2003: *Julie Mehretu*. New York: T Walker Art Center.
- Irigaray, L.** 2002: *Heidegger's forgetting of air*. London: Continuum.
- Kwan, M.-P.** 2002: Feminist visualization: re-envisioning GIS as a method in feminist geographic research. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, 645–61.
- Mehretu, J.** 2003: Ethiopian passages. Retrieved 17 February 2005 from <http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/passages/mehretu-conversation.html>
- Morris, D.** 2004: *The sense of space*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Pred, A.** 2001: *Only in Sweden*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Thrift, N.J.** 2004: Driving in the city. *Theory Culture and Society* 21, 41–59.

Hägerstrand and the remaking of Sweden

Sture Öberg

Swedish Institute for Growth Policy Studies,
Box 4, 831 40 Östersund, Sweden

1 Introduction

The cultural geographer Torsten Hägerstrand was one of the most highly regarded social scientists of the last century. Anyone who met him or worked with him was invariably impressed by the clarity of his vision, the wealth of his ideas and the extent of his theoretical breadth. This essay deals with just a small part of the traces such a prominent researcher left behind him, specifically the impact that Hägerstrand had on both

Swedish regional national planning and town and country planning during the 1960s and 1970s. It does not deal with his major research impact, from the early theories on migration and the diffusion of innovations to the later work on time-geography. Nor does it deal with a person who could have been a leading advocate of governmental control of where people, industries and infrastructure should be localized in Sweden. Others had that kind of approach to planning during those decades.