The Examination of Social Relationships in Space: Its Territorial, Empirical and Practical Parameters

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Abstract: Social geography is seen as part of an integrated social science, being important for its emphasis on people and its maintenance of the importance of the spatial in social theory. The paper proceeds by looking at the problems of definition, concluding that most definitions are time-specific. Despite this fact, they remain influential and also enable the three main strands of social geographical development to be identified, these being the empirical, the theoretical and the practical. These themes are elaborated in turn as are the relationships between them. While 'the empirical' has tended towards empiricism, 'the theoretical' is perhaps only just beginning to ground itself in the study of the real world. But 'the practical' — or policy element — is seen as being underdeveloped. The conclusion addresses the possible fusion of the three strands.

Social geography must be seen as part of the general movement within the social sciences towards a more integrated, interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, in a recent historical view of the sub-discipline, the author suggested that such movement might possibly result in the demise of social geography (Eyles and Smith 1978). It is, however, important to interpret such a comment correctly. The move towards greater social science integration is likely to lead to the demise of social geography as a separate entity. This does not mean that it will cease to exist. It will contribute to, become part of, and be constituted by the broader social science endeavours. Paradoxically, this may require a greater awareness of the role of social geography. Thus, even in multidisciplinary studies, social geography remains important for two reasons. In the field of human geography, it constantly and consistently focuses attention on people and their problems. It is possible to argue that human geography itself is artifact-oriented, analyzing the city, the factory or the clinic rather than the people whose actions and activities constitute such artifacts. In social science, social geography keeps the geographical dimension to the fore. All social actions have a geographical dimension which is more than a mere reflex of the social. Historically, most social theory has been almost totally aspatial. It is only recently that such theory has recognized the importance of the spatial (see Giddens 1981). That dimension must not disappear from view again.

The Problem of Definition

While it may be argued that the importance of social geography has been identified it is necessary to determine what constitutes social geography, before it is possible to assess developments in the sub-discipline. It must of course be recognized that no one definition is likely to be acceptable to the whole community of scholars working in 'social geography' and its related fields. It may be suggested that social geography orders and structures geographical events and entities in a specific way, namely one in which 'people' are placed at the centre of attention. 'People' requires some elaboration. Do we take it to mean individuals, groups or population aggregates? Does it treat these categories simply as they are, as bundles of attributes or as social relationships? We may answer these questions by suggesting that the primary focus of social geography is the social group in space (see Jones and Eyles 1977), where social group is taken to mean a collectivity of individuals meaningfully related by shared social attributes, such as occupational status, ethnicity, family status, political affiliation, educational qualifications, and health status. But this identification of social groups in space is only a first step in social geographical analysis. Its tasks may also be said to include the exploration of the activities of these groups as in shopping and leisure behaviour, and the search for housing space, and the assessment of the impact of the relationships
between different groups in space, as for example, occurs in migration and segregation. In broad terms, therefore, 'people in space' — the core of social geographical investigations — becomes social relationships in space. But space is more than the geographical stage or spatial setting in which social relationships take place. Locations and spatial relationships must not be seen as mere reflexes of the social system. The relationships have an additional impact on phenomena, activities and relations in society.

From elaborating the idea of 'people in space' three empirical sets of problems have been identified within social geography: the isolation of meaningful social groups in space (a task shared with sociology); the examination of group activities (shared with planning studies); and the assessment of the impacts of group interactions (shared with several social sciences). The core of social geography is, therefore, empirical and this empirical core firmly locates the sub-discipline within an interdisciplinary framework. But social geography is not merely an empirical science, it is also a theoretical and practical one as well. It is possible to discern these other interests if we continue our assessment of the problem of definition, by examining earlier definitions of the field.

The definition of social geography has varied quite significantly over time and it is interesting to note that its definition has usually reflected the dominant academic interests in human geography at particular times. Thus, in the mid-1950s, Watson (1957) defined social geography as the identification of different regions according to associations of social phenomena related to the total environment, firmly locating the sub-field in the traditions of regional geography. About a decade later, Pahl (1965) suggested that social geography was the study of the patterns and processes necessary for understanding socially defined populations in a spatial setting. Such a definition may be said to mirror the concerns of scientific social science and to emphasize the links with other social disciplines. In the mid-1970s, Eyles (1974) defined the subject as being concerned with the analysis of the social patterns and processes arising from the distribution of, and access to, scarce resources, reflecting the relevance movement and the welfare-social problems perspectives. In such a definition, social geography was viewed as a normative perspective. This was taken further by Asheim (1979) who stressed the role of structural relations in analyzing social problems, analysis being of material reality and the social contradictions this produces.

This last definition highlights the incorporation of marxist theory into social geography. Two further definitions, more general and less time-specific, emphasize the input of humanist ideas. Thus, Buttimer (1968) saw social geography as the study of the areal patterns and functional relations of social groups in their environments as well as their activities and channels of communication, while Jones (1975) argued that it consisted of understanding the patterns which arise from the use social groups make of space as they see it, and of the processes involved in making and changing such patterns. While these definitions may be regarded as detailed variations on the 'people in space' formulation, they also emphasize the importance of shared communications and perceived space, i.e. they implicitly stress humanist ideas.

It is pertinent to ask: what is the relevance of these definitions if they are time-specific? Their relevance to an assessment of recent social geography is fourfold. First, they point to the close relations between social geography and other social sciences as well as conventional scientific practice (Pahl, Buttimer). Secondly, although their derivation is time-specific, their influence shapes and continues to shape social geographical research. Thus, it is possible to suggest that Watson's areal differentiation approach may be still found in the welfare approach of Smith (1977, 1979) which identifies variations in quality of life within and between territories. The emphasis on 'scarce resources' (Eyles) may still be seen in the development and assessment of output and evaluation measures in the fields of educational and health care provision. In passing, it may be noted that the continued utility and relevance of earlier ideas argues for the rejection of the notion of paradigm shift in preference to evolutionary approaches. While the paradigm approach emphasizes change within scientific practice, evolutionary theory (see Bellah 1964, Fletcher 1974), with its references to relicts, the problematic path of development and the co-existence of competing systems, links the history of ideas firmly with societal change. Such a view does not suggest that earlier ideas are relicts in any pejorative sense but that they maintain a significant role even when others come to the fore.

Linked to the possibility of policy evaluation, is the third relevance of the definitions. They point to a possible practical involvement for social geography in that its empirical investigations may help in formulating, monitoring, instigating or changing policy. Fourthly, the definitions point to the close relationship between social geography and social theory. On a general level, due attention is paid to the significance of ethical theory, i.e. that human endeavour should be directed at improving the human condition. In this regard, social geography may be regarded as a truly humanist enterprise. The general definitions of Buttimer and Jones support such a contention in that improvement may better emerge from understanding what people are, how they see themselves and from what they want. This empathetic approach would, however, be challenged by the marxist perspective (Asheim) which advocates not only a particular way of looking at the world but also a political action programme aimed at the radical transformation of society as it is presently constituted. At the level of social geographical work, such perspective has emphasized critique, i.e. the importance of exposing the assumptions of theoretical systems, and there is a rich