Introduction

Except for those authors who have already given deep consideration to the subject, and for those who welcome every opportunity to advance their views, an unexpected invitation to prepare an article on social geography is a difficult challenge. My response has been to adopt a dissimulatingly simple objective, to write a personal clarification of the nature of social geography. This has been tackled firstly by examining the question from an epistemological perspective. By addressing the questions; what requires to be understood and which names do we give to different branches of knowledge; the aim has been to identify the ideal or ultimate objectives of sociology, geography and social geography. Later sections of the paper adopt an empirical approach to the same problem. More attention is given to the current enthusiasms and work of human and social geographers but the discussion is guided by several of the observations of the theoretical section. A critical evaluation of recent contributions to social geography, including my own, is developed, including discussion of the lessons that have been drawn from my involvement with a specific and dominantly-applied area of social study; that concerned with the processes of human ageing and the circumstances of elderly people.

The publication of this symposium on social geography itself demonstrates that the subject's aims and scope are not agreed. The present diversity of views constitutes more than an interesting epistemological problem because it is producing among students and potential contributors sufficient confusion and disdain to give grounds for neglect. The differences are so considerable as to be commonly perceived as competitive, and they are sometimes explicitly held to be antagonistic. It is believed that this state of affairs has inhibited wide participation in or sustained attention to the development of the subject. From the undergraduate student who is characteristically bewildered by contradictory statements, to the mental contortions produced by a recent attempt to synthesize the recommendations of a SSRC workshop of established researchers, the field of study is revealed not as one with healthy divergences but as one in disarray (Herbert 1980).

It is believed that an explanation of these contradictions and differences can be found, and that it would lead to some useful resolutions. If each substantial point of view can be positioned within a broad epistemology of social
geography, then perhaps the proponents of very different aims will better appreciate the contribution that others seek. Some such course is required, and overdue, to promote the subject’s development and to end its present fissile and autopathic tendencies.

The experience of working in the Joint School of Geography of King’s College and the London School of Economics has provided ample stimulation for careful thought about social geography. The subject has been taught in the Joint School since the early 1960s by Emrys Jones (also a contributor to this volume). Trained at the University of Wales by H.J. Fleure, he maintains some continuity from the possibilist conception of social geography as the study of societies and communities in their historical, cultural and environmental settings. His highly original “Social Geography of Belfast” extended these interests to a mid-twentieth century city distinguished by its particularly complex cultural and political divisions and settlement history (Jones 1960). He has widened and refined social geography from its early modern concerns with rural and pre-industrial habitats (Jones and Eyles 1977).

Since 1970 several disparate social interests have been introduced into the Joint School by Barrie Morgan (also a contributor to this volume), Simon Duncan and myself. Barrie Morgan’s interest focusses on the spatial aspects of the social processes of class, status and ethnic segregation, and of assimilation and social change, mainly within metropolitan settings (Morgan 1984). In clear contrast Simon Duncan teaches social geography as radical human geography with a neomarxist approach to the structural determinants of change in the political economy and its social formations (Duncan 1977). A special interest is retained in spatial and place-related topics but their position is not necessarily central. Different again has been my contribution to social geography. It started with the teaching of population studies and urban social geography, but a strengthening commitment to the study of human ageing and the circumstances of the elderly has given rise to another and more applied set of priorities. From an interest in the demographic influences upon social and geographical change, and learning from the experience of a sequence of localized empirical surveys, an interest has steadily deepened in the geographical variation of contemporary social forms. This multiplicity and emergent federation of interests in the Joint School has been reinforced by the views and interests of other colleagues, not least those of the editor in the history and philosophy of the subject. Such is the background which has prompted, from time to time, thought and discussion on the nature of social geography. While the concerted effort to organize in this paper the resulting insights has had short duration, their genesis has been proceeding unevenly over several years.

The argument of the paper will begin with a review of the epistemological nature of sociology. The broad interpretation of social philosophers and of the most perceptive practitioners will be contrasted with the narrower scope of sociology evinced in contemporary work and inherent in the institutional division of social studies. Some consideration will be given to the respective roles of sociology and economics, partly to illustrate the sources and the wastefulness of misunderstanding, but also because of the relevance of this matter to the respective positions of economic geography and social geography. The second theme to be developed will be the role and scope of geography as a branch of knowledge. Although this topic has been thoroughly debated, it would be impossible to proceed without making my position clear. Once more the approach will start from a theoretical taxonomy of knowledge rather than an interpretation of the work that geographers have recently been pursuing or advocating. The reasoning and the ambition is that through an expression of the ideal roles and scope of sociology and of geography it will be possible to describe a distinctive, durable and almost uncontroversial role for social geography. In the final sections of the paper a preliminary discussion and assessment of these epistemological statements will be attempted from empirical perspectives. In other words, the theoretical potential of social geography will be contrasted with the objectives and achievement of the studies that I and others have been conducting within either our own conceptions or at least the label of social geography.

Sociology and the Social Sciences

Many of the most philosophical and the most able commentators on the study of human activities and organizations have tended to bestow sociology with a very broad scientific role. Sociology in this sense is used interchangeably with the terms ‘social sciences’ and ‘human sciences’, as in the dictionary definition, ‘the science or study of the origin, history and constitution of human society; social science’ (Shorter OED). Auguste Comte’s “Cours de Philosophie Positive” (1830–42) introduced the conception of sociology as the science of man and society, and this view has since gained currency even while his vision of politics as a predictive science has been dismissed (Park 1920–22). Scientific sociology studies all social forms and conditions including those which feature today in the academic disciplines of economics, political science, ethnography, anthropology and social psychology (Halsey 1972, 1978). Within this framework have developed many other more specific specialisms including several pursued by human geographers, e.g. nomothetic enquiries into the implications of location and space on man’s activities. Quite commonly these specialisms pursue their own internal aims, but the knowledge that they produce can and sometimes does provide materials for the superordinate endeavour.