Social Theory and Prospects in Social Geography

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Abstract: There is little doubt that a phenomenological approach in the Husserlian mould is valuable in curbing the excessive positivism and naivety that have characterised much of the social geography undertaken in Britain during the past twenty years. However, the operational value of phenomenology in social geography is more controversial. Ley’s formulation of a phenomenologically based social geography focussing on the concept of place suffers from certain methodological and theoretical problems that stem, in part, from his adoption of Schutz’s conceptualisation of the social world. A phenomenologically inspired but modified approach, involving the concepts of structuration and power and drawing heavily on the work of Giddens, is suggested as superior. This conceptualisation, which connects human action with structural explanation, permits a valuable reformulation of the geography of mental illness and may have similarly worthwhile applications in other areas of interest to social geographers.

Introduction

Any expectation that a period of methodological and theoretical tranquility might succeed the upheavals of quantification and model building has not been realised. While it may be too extreme to say that human geography is in turmoil, current debates are fierce and fundamental. In social geography much of the controversy has polarised to form a liberal positivist versus marxist dichotomy 1). However, cultural geographers and historical geographers have explored humanistic and phenomenological perspectives and, particularly through the work of Ley, the relevance of such perspectives to social geography has been demonstrated 2).

Although by no means a stream, there has been, over the last ten years or so, more than a significant trickle of writings exploring phenomenological and humanistic approaches in human geography 3). Yet there are few signs of a readiness on the part of human geographers to accept these insights and to adopt them in research procedures. This is not difficult to understand. The novelty, if not the obscurity of the epistemology (perhaps necessary for the advancement of the sponsors of the “new” approach), has not encouraged acceptance by “conventional” geographers 4). This is not to suggest that there has been any widespread direct rejection of phenomenology; as yet there are few responses in the geographical literature that have sought to destroy its philosophical foundation 5). Rather, the response appears to have been one of deliberate neglect based on the premise that phenomenology and even humanism have little to say about empirical research that can be operationalized. Indeed, rather than being helpful, a close adherence to the Husserlian tradition, with its commitment to “reflective” thought directed towards the production of transcendental essences, seems to cast doubt on the merit of the whole empiricist enterprise to which human geographers, in Britain at least, have almost always been committed 6). However, the history of paradigm shift does not
suggest that change is likely to be swift or painless and the lack of immediate acceptance is no reason not to reflect on possibilities and prospects 7).

Phenomenology and Place

In examining these possibilities and prospects, Ley's work offers an appropriate point of departure 8). Ley takes the view that Schutz's phenomenology, with its orientation towards social action, holds out strong possibilities for a phenomenologically based, but empirical, social geography 9). Four steps on the way to such a goal are identified. The first involves,

"a radical description of the things themselves which recognizes the pervasive presence of the subjective as well as the objective in all areas of behaviour: the informal, the scientific, the institutional" 10).

The second is the adoption of a "philosophical underpinning which embraces both object and subject, fact and value", while the third is,

"the recognition that the lifeworld is not solitary but a place of fellow believers; intersubjectivity is the basis for a social model of man" 11).

Given an acceptance of Schutz's phenomenology, it is difficult to find fault with these propositions. However, while they help to define the planes within which a phenomenologically based social geography might be located, they do not really indicate the form it should take.

In a fourth step, however, Ley begins to sketch a few lines of detail and as he does inherent problems become apparent. Central to his conception is place. This is viewed as,

"an amalgam of fact and value, comprising both the objectivity of the map and the subjectivity of experience" 12).

Discovering the meaning or personality of place is complicated by the fact that in "contemporary urbanism a place may commonly have a multiple reality" but Ley regards research as feasible because,

"Usually ... a dominant meaning holds sway and the landscape can then act in the phenomenological sense of a product, as an indicator of the subjective intentions which moulded it" 13).

"This personality of place ranges in scale from the national state to the geographical church; any habitually interacting group of people convey a character to the place they occupy which is immediately apparent to an outsider, though unquestioned and taken for granted by habitués" 14).

This conception of a phenomenologically based social geography raises many important issues.

Social Theoretical Issues

In updating the meaning of place from a Vidalian idea to one that is appropriate to modern urbanized and industrialized society, Ley's focus is the habitually interacting group rather than the pays. Yet the habitually interacting groups of residents in high rise developments or neighbourhood estates may have virtually no influence on the appearance of the area in which they live 15). While they may share meanings, the residents will not have created the townscape and no intimate bond, in the sense that place can be regarded as the product of the "subjective intentions which moulded it", is likely to exist.

Ley's idea of habitually interacting groups of people conveying a character to the place they occupy comes close to aspects of Park's human ecology, particularly the concepts of community and natural area. Indeed, it is worth noting Ley's approval of the Chicago school. He argues that Park's approach was basically humanistic, and well conceived, but that it was overwhelmed by the tide of positivism that also swept over Vidalian geography. Both perished because they were unable to draw on the theoretical underpinning of phenomenology that could have saved them. It is a matter of debate whether Park's perspective was essentially humanistic. Some of his statements seem to indicate a clear commitment to positivism while the importance attached to ethnographic studies would seem to contradict this 16). Yet even if these ethnographic studies do demonstrate the essential humanism of the Chicago school, their involvement with the notion of community precludes an uncomplicated revival.

In social geography there can have been few concepts responsible for as much confusion, or more in need of the phenomenological operation of bracketing, as the concept of community 17). Rather than performing such an operation, Ley adopts an uncritical consensus view of community. Certainly he offers no discussion of power (whether at an interpersonal, inter-group or institutional level) in the development of shared meanings of place 18).

This is not because Ley is unaware of the possibility that structural forces may influence meanings and social action; it is rather that he defers it, along with other issues, for further study. He recognizes the need for,

"discussion of a number of important methodological issues, including the nature of generalization in a phenomenologically based social geography, verstehen as an explanatory method, the role of structural as against situational forces in social action, and the controversy of existence and essence in phenomenology" 19).

Ley does not say what "structural" means in this context but constraints and forces acting upon consciousness that stem from social structure are surely so critical to an adequate conceptual framework that they require immediate attention. Indeed, for Gregory, these matters constitute a most central problem that he attempts to overcome by constructing a bridge between humanism and marxism 20). In developing this link he draws on the work of Giddens 21). This work, which demonstrates the inadequacy of Ley's social theory, has important implications for a phenomenologically based social geography and for the prospects for a theoretical synthesis upon which social geographers might draw.