Derridean Geographies

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Following the death of Jacques Derrida on 8 October, we were asked to provide some brief comments on the engagements between his work and geography as an organised body of knowledge. In the following we offer an account that draws primarily upon our own "Derridean geographies", but which also signals the wider, disciplinary and post-disciplinary fields within which Derrida's work has been received. Indeed, it is in part through a critical reading of Derrida, we suggest, that social theory has witnessed a reinvigorated sense of contingency and context in regard to the location and description of its objects of analysis, as well as a sensitivity toward the situated character of the politics and ethics that drive particular research projects.

We begin by noting the decidedly awkward introduction of Derridean thought to geography in the 1990s, when work that labelled itself as "post-structuralist" or "post-modern", as well as a host of concepts and methods under the heading of "social theory" and "literary theory", were increasingly deployed as a means of critiquing the ontological presumptions and claims to scientific rigour of what were then considered to be the dominant "paradigms" within the discipline, namely spatial science, critical realist/Marxist, and humanist geographies. Though much of this work shared a common concern over what has been termed the "crisis of representation", whereby the capturing and reflecting—as in confining and mirroring—of a real world referent in thought, language, and visual media is understood to be both illusory and non-productive, the manifold differences within this body of work were by and large unmentioned. Indeed, debate would turn time and again to the advocacy or condemnation of what was perceived to be a "new" theoretical framework or "ism".

We would like to draw out three inter-related points in regard to this state of affairs that speak to current debates on the engagements

between Derridean thought and geography. First, several geographers, ourselves included, have used Derrida's (1988) "constitutive outside" to offer an epistemological critique of geography's theoretical framings; this should not be confused, however, with the offering of a "new" theoretical framework that does the same job better. Doel (1993, 1999), Barnes (1994) and Dixon and Jones (1996, 1998, 2004), for example, have all dwelt on modern-day geography as a "metaphysics of the proper" (Derrida 1972), whereby seemingly secure ontological categories, such as presence, essence, existence, cause, origin, substance, subject, truth, God, and "man", have been understood as pivotal in the formulation and development of geography's "paradigms". Each of these, it is argued, has laid claim to a configuration of conceptually related characteristics, such as self-possession, presence, purity and propriety. In response, "Derridean geographies" have noted not only the artifice of such pivots, but also the manner in which the theoretical claims based upon them have allowed for very particular terms of debate (and especially binary logics) to emerge within the discipline around, for example, issues of validity, representation and praxis.[1]

Though Derrida's work has been used to articulate a particular critique of geography as an organised body of knowledge, this should not be taken as the heralding of a unified, comprehensive "ism". This is because, for Derrida, one can only aim to secure an ordering framework (such as a "key concept" or "analytic tool"), but such attempts will necessarily fail. Why?

The answer lies in Derrida's notion of context, meant to signal the inter-referential character of meaning. For Derrida, context must be understood in the broadest terms possible, as "the entire real history of the world" (1988:136). This is why his aphoristic phrasing, "there's nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) is not, as is sometimes alleged, idealist, for in Derrida's work all texts are in context. As we understand it, context refers to the temporary stabilisation of meanings drawn together in the articulation of a discourse that communicates those meanings in a sensible form by establishing differences among them. Context fixes the relational field of meaning, but it does so only by drawing upon previous contexts that are themselves embedded in still other contexts. This inter-contextual character of the relations among constructs is "intertext", a term specifying how one context is related to others, but also how they might be transformed. Thus, deconstruction as a methodology is the effort, "to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualisation" (1988:136).

There is, then, no "one size fits all" notion of deconstruction, simply because this would require an unequivocal definition of the term that has somehow been hoisted outside of context. In a similar vein,

"Derridean geographies" cannot be considered a form of analysis in the conventional sense of the term because analysis presumes reduction, meaning to dissect or "unpack" compound or "messy" concepts and ideas to their basic, or foundational, elements. Such geographies, as illustrated, for example, in the work of Harley (1989) on maps, Barnett (2003, 2004) on democracy and Doel (1994, 2004) on materialism, have no such end in sight. Instead, the concepts in question are interpreted, activated, and transmuted (potentially *ad infinitum*); in the process, their singular meaning—that which escapes generalities, theories and frameworks—is rendered a mere (but nonetheless endlessly productive) "trace".

This emphasis on the continued transformation of concepts, or what Derrida terms their "iterability", leads us to our third point. If meaning is related to context, in the sense of the term noted above, then there can be no "proper" context to provide proof of a final meaning. For some, this necessarily leads to nihilism, understood as the rejection of all systems of authority, morality and social custom (cf Eagleton's 2004 defence of Derrida). As such, our notions of "good" and "evil" become mere free-floating signifiers, bereft of political, ethical or moral leverage. And yet, as many commentators have written, Derrida was in fact committed to the promise of democracy while maintaining that current democracies fall far short of this. What is more, he strove to deconstruct the law in the name of justice, tolerance in the name of hospitality and, more recently, to bear witness for those, such as animals, who cannot speak for themselves. Indeed, it is this "ethico-political" concern in Derrida's work that currently engages geographers.

In sum, while one cannot point to the development over the past 15 years or so of a new theoretical "framework" to guide and direct geographical research, there has emerged what one might call a geographical grammatology, which allies a theory of critique with that of invention and practice. Designed to provoke and stimulate, such works will not be subsumed or contained within the discipline's conceptual and methodological structuring mechanisms, but will continue to be, we would hope, awkward relations.

Endnotes

[1] This deployment of the constitutive outside has, somewhat ironically perhaps, also been noted by some (see Nemeth 1997) as having been undertaken at the expense of "postmodern" theory because the latter is understood to be of less analytical value. The counter-argument has been made that postmodern theory, as it became deployed within geography, was too preoccupied with an essentialised notion of human existence and agency. In this sense, Derrida's emphasis on "difference" was held to be more productive than a general advocacy of "difference" (see Dixon and Jones 1997).

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