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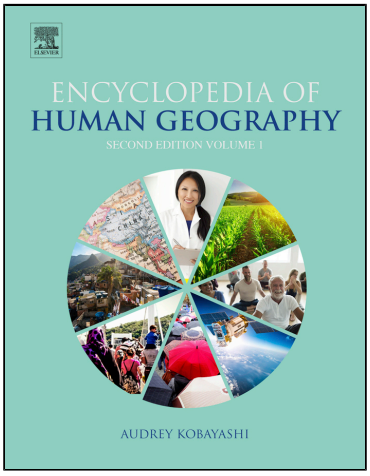

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Fluidity and Fixity

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Glossary

Deconstruction Poststructuralist method that renders a conceptual system contextual or uncertain by illustrating that system's codependence on other, presumably independent, concepts or systems.

Deterritorialization The act of unmaking established and conventional ways of framing, naming, and claiming space.

Epistemology Study of how we know and understand the world, typically described by key binary forms such as objectivity/subjectivity, interpretation/explanation, rational/emotional, idealist/materialist, etc.

Ontology Study of what the world is like or must be like in order for us to know it, typically described by key binary forms such as individual/society, nature/culture, space/time, discrete/relational, etc.

Reterritorialization The framing, naming, and claiming of space following deterritorialization.

> … my ontology of globalization fluidifies such solidified thinking revolving around such motifs as fluidity and flow, movement and mobility, folds and networks. A consequence of that ontology – where all that is solid melts into air – is a rejection of scales and boundaries altogether as globalization and world cities are too intermingled through scattered lines of humans and non-humans to be delimited in any meaningful sense.
>
> R. G. Smith, Progress in Human Geography (2003)

The work of sorting and analyzing phenomena and processes through binaries is an advanced stage of methodology. It helps us make sense of the world, and while it is not quite explanation per se, it is a step in that direction. It sharpens our understanding of the purchase of the paired terms themselves, as well as the interrelations between the phenomena and processes the binaries classify and, perhaps, illuminate. In this sorting, it is not unusual to learn that objects of analysis are too complex to be easily captured by one of the terms; rather than posing a roadblock, this can lead to a productive conceptual unpacking of both the elements sorted and the terms themselves. For example, consider the value of fixity and fluidity in conceptualizing components of globalization. We might assume, as R. G. Smith appears to do in the epigraph, that fluidity is the precondition (if not the definition) of globalization. As evidence, we might point to expansive, sinuous flows exhibited by a selection of transnational elites and global production networks. But what if we consider local cultural resistances to globalization? Are these reactions not a direct result of global capital expansion and, therefore, evidence of fixity within it? The neologism "glocalization" arose, in part, to describe aspects of globalization's multiplicity.

We might ask, further, to what extent globalization's components are usefully conceptualized relative to other binaries, such as order/chaos, nature/culture, space/time, organic/technological, or individual/society. We would expect that these oppositions will have uneven relevance to globalization. To this end, some theorists have heuristically conceptualized binary oppositions as star-like entities in a force field of gravitational tension, where they exhibit more or less attraction to one another depending on the phenomena they help refine. In this imaginary, fixity/fluidity might be centrally positioned for the task of thinking through globalization, while other binaries, though not entirely irrelevant, might have less relevance. They would be, by analogy, more remote in the constellation of binaries that ultimately helps us make sense of globalization in discursive terms, that is, in how we name, categorize, and analyze the world. In short, theorizing binaries is partly a process of thinking through the traction they have in clarifying phenomena and processes and their interrelations. To be fully recursive in this way of thinking, it is worth noting that naming, categorizing, and analyzing differences underpin the very emergence of binary oppositions and their position to one another in this constellatory imaginary. In this way, we can infer that globalization—among other concepts—has itself contributed to the emergence of fixity and fluidity as a binary worthy of the attention of human geographers. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, the role of theorists is to fabricate concepts (and to put them to use).

Among binaries, the mesolevel terms of fixity and fluidity are less abstract than other binaries we might entertain, such as objective and subjective, general and particular, or individual and society. These are macrolevel oppositions with wide orbits. Circulating within the purview of the objectivity and subjectivity binary, for example, we might find science and art, body and mind, and rational and emotional. Each of these, in turn, has a more specific resonance. Although an abstraction, the fixity and fluidity binary works in this more concrete domain. It does its sorting in close proximity to order/chaos and stability/ instability, but at the same time, it cannot be reduced to either, in part because fluidities can be orderly and stable and because, unlike these two other terms, fixity/fluidity carries with it an assumption of geographic movement (and a corresponding spatial image). These and a number of other common binaries share affinities to fixity/fluidity. A selection of them appears in **Table 1**. All have resonances with fixity and fluidity, but none are close enough to be coterminous with it. Some, such as rigor/play, necessary/contingent, masculinist/feminist, and deterministic/random, are in the domain of methodology (including epistemology); others, such as orderly/chaotic, being/becoming, and identity/hybridity, are ontological in nature; meanwhile, enclosed/free, scale/network, sedentary/nomadic, and controlled/unfettered bring sharply to mind specific spatial associations.

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Table 1 Binaries related to fixity and fluidity.

Fixity	*Fluidity*
Orderly	Chaotic
Stability	Instability
Rigor	Play
Science	Art
Coherent	Illogical
Controlled	Unfettered
Masculinist	Feminist
Predictable	Uncertain
Sight	Touch
Deterministic	Random
Sedentary	Nomadic
Necessary	Contingent
Singular	Multiple
Identity	Hybridity
Essentialist	Polymorphous
Hegemony	Resistance
Territorialization	Deterritorialization
Scale	Network
Angle	Arc
Solid	Liquid
Root	Rhizome
Being	Becoming
Number	Word
Static	Dynamic
Enclosed	Free

Fig. 1 provides visual examples of the binary's spatial associations. Specifically, it contrasts eight fractal images categorized according to the fixity/fluidity binary. These are among the many produced and made freely available by astronomer Sven Geier. At the risk of generalizing from mathematical expressions rendered either cartographically (view from above) or immersively (a POV from the middle), Fig. 1A and B offer a lesson in repetition (fixity) and difference (fluidity). The images imply that angularity is not the sole purview of fixity. Fig. 1C and D both depict flows, but the one categorized under fixity aligns with familiar notions of scalar verticality, while the POV of the other shows nonrecurrent, or at least complexly ordered, horizontal networks. Fig. 1E aims to show how control, of the familiar hexagonal type, can be superimposed over regulated flows, while Fig. 1F appears to invoke the Deleuzoguattarian process of emergence. Finally, Fig. 1G and H depict different fluidities released from, and bound by, different structural fixities—in the former case by the Euclidean grid and in the latter by the Mandelbrot nautilus.

The complexities above do not exhaust the analysis of binaries, for a single binary includes not only a structure—an either/or—but also the conceptual tools for unraveling that structure. Such poststructuralist analyses point to the nonbinary character of binaries themselves, that is, to the relational associations that their terms share and the consequent destabilizations of meaning that accompany our efforts to make sense of the world through them. Hegel described this relational character through the master/slave dialectic. In it, the consciousness of each (hypothetical) person was found to depend on the other: neither is capable of asserting themselves as self-sufficiently conscious; rather, they exist in a codependency in which the very concept of master—and a masterly consciousness—requires an "other," oppositional partner, namely, a slave who is similarly defined not on their own terms but in terms of their relation to the master.

Thinking generally from this example, poststructuralists understand all binaries to be relationally constituted. Neither term can self-posit nor stand on its own. (Within our context, if everything is fixed, and fixity is all there is, then fixity would be impossible to name, and thus meaningless.) As such, binary terms can only do their work in relation to one another; like the master and the slave, they are only defined in opposition, i.e., by what they are not. This "constitutive outside" is thus a negative production. It led Jacques Derrida to coin the phrase, "trace of the other," by which he meant the absent or hidden presence of the "other" that marks and enlivens the "one" in a dynamic, power-laden process of meaning creation. Derrida's method of deconstruction is to discover and then "pull the thread" of the trace, to follow its obscured operation in thought and writing, and to dismantle the self-posited assurance, even effrontery, of the center (usually taken to be the dominant term).

Some time ago, Edward Said (in *Orientalism*) and Toni Morrison (in *Playing in the Dark*) offered masterful deconstructions of the east/west and black/white binaries, respectively, detailing the exhaustive political work performed by these "us/them" binaries. As Toni Morrison wrote in the context of whiteness and American literature, there exists a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit Africanist presence deep in the texture of American literature, even when that literature is not "about" Africanist presences or characters.

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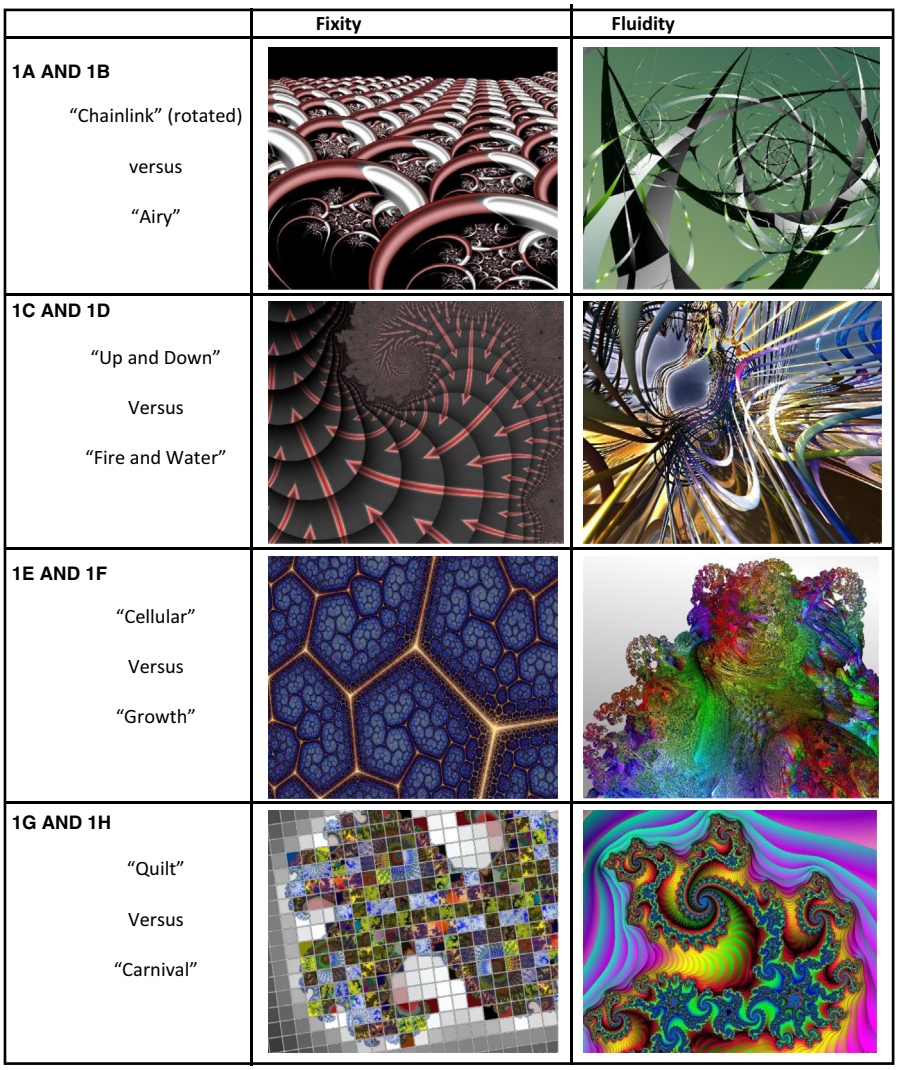

Figure 1 Images from Sven Geier's "Fractal Bargain Bin," *Digital Expressions*. The image names are his own. See: https://www.sgeier.net/fractals/indexe.php. Used with permission.

In this way, many immigrant groups, first Northern and then Eastern and Southern European, were able to distinguish their "white" American identity from the black population.

This presence-in-absence, or interarticulation, also has implications for thinking through fixity and fluidity. It suggests that we should not expect any space—or any identity, event, or meaning there through—to ever be completely fixed or incessantly fluid. Space will always provide the resources for its dissemination, and its constraints will never evaporate, leaving us in a miasmatic air. We discern this somewhat in Geier's (admittedly selected) fractals, where we find fluid motions in monotonous repetition and minute regularities in sinuous dispersions. Politically speaking, this suggests that we should be wary of normative assumptions about fixity and fluidity. For, while fixity tends to gather negative connotations, such as systems of command and control, the assertion of identity (vs. celebrations of fluid hybridities), the constraining weight of the grid epistemology, and the death to thought and difference that inheres in the process of categorization, these coagulations may at the same time be preconditions for, or the result of, political resistance. Meanwhile, for some, fluidity connotes freedom: a state of ever expansive experimentations and emergences; resistance to the machinic apparatus of the state; lines of flight to other words of possibility; and self-realization through mobility. These too, however, offer no guarantees—either for the kind of politics that claims them or their outcomes. Poststructuralism insists that such associations are contextual, not absolute, and by their nature, normative judgments do not sit easily with contextualization. Thought constitutively, the analysis of fixity and fluidity should not aim to recover topologically identical forms but should instead pay attention to the generation of transformative meanings, what Derrida would refer to as the"ceaseless recontextualization of context," or, as Deleuze and Guattari tellingly put it, "Never believe that a smooth [versus striated] space will suffice to save us."

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Fixity and Fluidity in Geographic Thought

Fixity and fluidity have captured the imagination of many geographers over the past 20 years, but it would be a mistake not to mention the implicit role of the binary in earlier periods of geographic thought. In the two decades straddling the midpoint of the 20th Century, we find that one of the central problems of geography—especially in the United States—was how to theorize regions. The lens of fixity and fluidity, though not named as such, arguably figures in these discussions. Are regions ontic, that is, naturally given, objectively and quantitatively determined spatial units with set (if temporally dynamic) boundaries and characteristics (see Fig. 1A)? Or, as others such as Preston James would claim, are they more like hypotheses, contingently varying in size and shape based on the priorities and perceptions of the researcher and the questions being posed? The former position, aligned with fixity, led many down a path toward refining regional definitions. The latter proposition sided more comfortably with regional malleability, the uncertainties of which depended on the research context, the relevant scale of analysis, and so on.

On the heels of regional geography, the discipline witnessed the rise of spatial science and with it the goal of establishing transcontextual spatial laws through deductive mathematical and inductive statistical studies. In the first, laws were sought by assuming away spatial difference and constructing abstract models of cities and regions through a small number of economic and social variables. It was common at the time to test and refine these models in the "real world," but one could not but notice that the pinnacle of theoretical achievement was that of spatial fixity—Central Place Theory's hexagons being the most famous of the efforts (see Fig. 1E). On the inductive side, most of the progress was in the development of regression models aimed at explaining spatial variation through a parsimonious selection of theoretically derived variables. In this effort, fixity was measured on the continuum of R^2: the amount of spatial variation accounted for versus the percentage remaining unaccounted for (plus random noise).The 1980s saw a move away from these fixed parameter regression models under the labels of the Spatial Expansion Method, Drift Analysis of Regression Parameters, and Geographically Weighted Regression. As methods that enabled researchers to model and interpret the slide of parameters across space, these efforts brought forth a minor paradigmatic shift in the law-seeking goals of spatial science. But at the limit, fixed versus variable parameter models arguably reference different ontological positions. The former assumes that, like the laws of the physical sciences, causal processes are stable across contexts; the latter proposes that contextual effects are the result of spatially varying contingencies affecting necessary relations (see Fig. 1G). The goal of varying parameter models is to investigate the context-specific operation of those unstable processes.

Poststructuralism is a successor to spatial science, and identity has been one of its primary theoretical and empirical objects. Written as "Identity," the concept is subject to critique for its singularity, instrumentality, hierarchy, and homogenization of difference, that is, the point at which differences are reduced to the categories that contain them. And yet, while categorization may be a kind of death, it is no less inevitable. Even Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in reaction to a time in Germany when identity formed the basis for genocide—even they concede the necessity of classification. Out of this dialectic of identity and difference—or, as it might be characterized, of fixity and fluidity—we find a contested politics: acknowledgment, affirmation, and assertion, on the one hand, and disidentification, dissimulation, and refusal, on the other. These are some of the terrains over which socialist, radical, Black, Latinx, postcolonial, transnational, and queer feminists have traveled. The central question, arguably complicated but not solved by the concept of intersectionality, is still debated decades after Black and Chicana feminisms challenged white feminism. That question is how can we articulate a political movement when the foundation of identity is always open to deconstruction?

Within this context, Chantal Mouffe charts a path forward that is more hopeful than as first it might appear, for she suggests that politics itself is the struggle over identities, with fixity/fluidity always interarticulated. The drive to fix identity and space, as we see now in much of the United States and Europe, can arguably take us on the road to fascism. However, as Mouffe would note, the embrace of difference as pure heterogeneity, dissemination, hybridity, incommensurability, and polymorphism presents its own dangers to politics, for it is here where all interests and all differences are seen as legitimate. When it comes to the limits of identity and difference, this points to a neither/nor stance with respect to the political poles of fixity and fluidity: neither pure essentialism nor pure disidentification.

Not last, we have the influential work of Deleuze and Guattari. Outside of the "spaces of flows"—of information, finance, and resistance—that Manuel Castells elaborated on in his detailed account of globalization, it is the Deleuzoguattarian ontological shift that has most popularized fixity and fluidity. The two theorists, widely regarded as geophilosophers among geographers, are behind a number of the oppositions that circulate in contemporary usage of fixity and fluidity, including the distinctions between root and rhizome, smooth and striated space, being and becoming, and territorialization and deterritorialization. In a series of works, Deleuze and Guattari propose a spatial ontology of fixity and fluidity that is very much about movement—a study in contrasts between the sedentary and the nomadic. It is in the sedentary where we find our now familiar list of fixities: domains, categories, attributes, orders, and hierarchies. The spatial parallel to these processes is striated space. There is, however, a completely other order—a nomadic rambler without property, enclosure, or measure. Yet, just as we might think that a smooth (deterritorialized) space might save us, we need to account for the fact that the nomad's wanderings, though not chaotic, are without destination. This formulation sets limits within the polarities of fixity/fluidity. At times, Deleuze and Guattari theorized nomadism through a description of the wolf pack, an emergent spatiality where individuals moved in and out of a nonhierarchical, deterritorializing formation characterized by dispersion, nondecomposable and variable distances, and metamorphoses and crossings—somewhere between a Brownian variability at the edge of chaos and the regularity in dispersion we find in fractals (see Fig. 1F), of which they expressed their fascination. As in territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization, we see in them a playful but ultimately serious account

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of fixity and fluidity, one that produces a constant tension between the two terms. The Deleuzoguattarian approach is to privilege neither, while simultaneously leveraging the productive capacities of both.

As Arun Saldanha explains in *Space after Deleuze,* Deleuzoguattarian concepts are not axioms developed to stand the test of time. They are "jolted into life" and churn away in use: "like creases in the map of trajectories of thinking, possible openings that have to be further developed, combined, or discarded." So, will fixity and fluidity continue to parse geography's phenomena and processes, or will it be supplanted by a new and more fashionable opposition? Probably yes.

See Also: Becoming; Central Place Theory; Deconstruction; Difference and the Politics of Difference; Geographically-Weighted Regression; Global Production Networks; Hegemony; History of Geography; Identity Politics; Intersectionality; Mobility; Networks; Other/Otherness; Poststructuralism/ Poststructuralist Geographies; Regional Geography; Scale; Spatial Expansion Method; Spatial Science; Transnational Elites; Uncertainty.

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