Poststructuralism/Poststructuralist Geographies

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Glossary

Deconstruction   Post-structuralist method that renders contextual or uncertain a conceptual system by illustrating that system's codependence on other, presumably independent concepts or systems.
Epistemology   Study of how we know and understand the world; typically described by key binary forms such as objectivity/subjectivity, interpretation/explanation, discrete/relational, etc.
Genealogy   Post-structuralist approach to both historical analysis and the historian that substitutes origins, linearity, and truth, for multiplicity, dispersion, and power/knowledge.
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, etc.

Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century geography underwent a series of conceptual revolutions, inspired as much by tumultuous on the ground events, as well as the crossover of ideas and concepts developed within other disciplines. Though the arrival of post-structuralism can be considered simply another 'turn' within the discipline, what renders this approach distinctive is its rigorous interrogation of those core concepts – such as objectivity and subjectivity, center and margin, materialism and idealism, truth and fiction – that underpin much of modern-day academia, including the majority of geographic thought and practice. To be specific, post-structuralism brought to the field of geography in the late 1980s and 1990s a critique that unsettled both the epistemological (i.e., theories on how we know the world) and ontological (theories on what that world consists of and how it works) moorings of the then dominant theoretical frameworks: spatial science, critical realism and Marxism, and humanism.

In these early years post-structuralism did not offer a clear counter-ontology to these frameworks. Rather, by claiming that any ontology is always already an outcome of epistemology, of our socially constructed ways of knowing, post-structuralists asked that we reflect not only on how we know, but also on how elements of ontology – such as space, place, nature, culture, individual, and society – become framed in thought in the first instance. In posing such questions, post-structuralism found, and continues to find, a productive moment in examining how social relations of power fix the meaning and significance of social practices, objects, and events, determining some to be self-evident, given, natural, and enduring. In regard to geography, this requires an analysis of why some objects – landscapes, regions, space, place, etc. – rather than others are taken to be central to geographic inquiry, as well as an analysis of how those objects are understood to exist and relate to one another.

This sort of post-structuralism, then, is epistemologically centered. Certainly, it came to prominence under the banner of a more widespread 'linguistic turn' in the humanities and social sciences, which emphasized the production of meaning and the 'social construction' of reality, and made much of the emphasis placed upon the construction of meanings in the work of Derrida and Foucault. For this reason, critics of post-structuralism offered a rejoinder that touted the sometimes brute forces of materiality: of class exploitation and the uneven distribution of wealth and poverty, of the forces of nature and the concrete effects of environmental conditions, and of gender relations and the facts of biological reproduction, to name a few.

Criticisms that post-structuralists have been concerned only with discourse and representation, as opposed to the 'real' material conditions within which these meanings were considered to be embedded, had a profound impact on geographic debate during the 1990s. Marxists and some feminists were often found accusing post-structuralists of a simplistic idealism and a relativist, even nihilist, politics. Post-structuralists responded by claiming that no objects were outside the systems of representation, and that any claim to know them in an unmediated way was no more than an exercise of power whereby one theoretical stance was privileged above all others as both accurate and truthful.

As these debates waged they also waned to the point of tiresomeness. It has been in the latter half of the movement that post-structuralist geographers have come to reassert their claims over ontology, largely by rethinking difference and representation in more explicitly materialist terms. In doing so, these geographers have interrogated more closely the ontological ramifications of the work of Derrida and Foucault, but have also explored the

work of Deleuze and Latour, whose contributions are discussed here. At the same time, what was a somewhat knee-jerk critique of other epistemological stances, for example, 'Marxism', as a 'meta-narrative' that promised to singularly explain real-world conditions, has been tempered by a more sensitive appraisal of the diversity of ideas beneath such a label. Indeed, it is this more nuanced approach to academic discourse that resonates with a post-structural emphasis on difference understood not only as a rejection of sameness and the status quo, but also as a receptivity toward the experimental and the new.

Taken together, both dimensions of post-structuralist thought – the epistemological and the ontological – pivot around a set of fundamental questions. These include: If meaning and representation are indeterminate and contextual, and if, as a consequence, the 'real' world is 'constructed' as an ontological fact, then how does power work to produce its truths? And, if difference in the world is not a residual from or a bad copy of a singular Identity, but is rather the immanent force characteristic of all materialities, including imaginings, emotions, words, and meanings (as well as those elements more usually thought of as material, such as organisms and the landscapes they inhabit), then how, in the shift in thought that moves from 'being' to 'becoming', do we go forth in the world to think and speak in terms of things and their qualities?

Before we begin to address these questions, it seems worthwhile to emphasize that though its intellectual roots are in Continental philosophy and literary theory, post-structuralism knows no boundaries when it comes to objects of analysis. So, though its impact has been most strongly felt in cultural geography, where it has not only invigorated research questions but has also led to the identification of new objects of analysis (e.g., films and other texts), its critical stance toward simplistic forms of truth, representation, materiality, and politics have become points of engagement between it and other geographic subfields, including economic geography; geopolitics and the state; urban and rural geography; cartography and geographic information system (GIS); social geographies of gender, 'race', and the body; postcolonial geographies; and nature–society relations. And, it is through this process of de-stabilization that post-structuralism has wide-ranging implications for geography at large.

Poststructuralism

Structuralism

Part of understanding the relationship between post-structuralism and structuralism is highlighted in the prefix 'post', as opposed to 'anti'. The former negates its

suffix, but it does so relationally and in ways that carry structuralism with it – as in beyond rather than against. For this reason, it is impossible to write about post-structuralism without first coming to some understanding of structuralism.

The literature associated with structuralism is complex and wide ranging, but in all its forms it holds that all manner of processes, objects, events, and meanings (let us call these POEMs for short), are taken to exist not as discrete entities, but as parts relationally embedded within, and constituted by, underlying wholes, or structures. It is not unusual to see structuralism rendered as an inflexible and static framework, but that would be a misunderstanding. A structure is not an external architecture upon which POEMs are hung, for such a view implies that a structure exists independently of the parts it embeds; instead, structures are constituted solely from the relations among their constitutive elements, or parts. And, since they do not exist independently of POEMs, structures are dynamic and spatially differentiated fields of relations. Finally, structures do not have material form nor do they have the ability to act; they are not visible in the empirical realm but, inasmuch as they systematize the relations, and therefore the causal efficacy, of POEMs, they are presumed to operate.

The most important structuralist thinker for the development of post-structuralism was the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). His goal was to understand the abstract structures behind all forms of social communication, from painting and religious rituals to chess games and the rules of courtship. As a linguist, Saussure applied his theory of semiotics – that is, the science of signs – to the study of language. In doing so, he rejected the traditional, historical approach to the study of language, a philological endeavor focusing on detailed descriptions of the historical evolution of particular languages and language families. He also rejected the positivist line of research dominant in his day, which sought to understand language through the analysis of sounds and their impact on the nervous system. For Saussure, elements of language gain their currency according to the structure that they create and within which they are embedded. A particular language, therefore, must be studied as a systematized collection of sounds and inscriptions, each of which, as in structuralism more generally, can only be assigned a value or meaning when thought of in relation to the remainder of the elements.

But how does language work to transmit meanings from one person to another? In analyzing the relations among these elements, Saussure struck an analytic distinction between the 'signified', which is the mental construct, or idea, of a particular phenomenon, and the 'signifier', which takes the form of a distinguishable 'mark', such as a sound, inscription, or special body

movement. Within a language, signifieds are associated with particular signifiers to form a 'sign'; in consequence, when people communicate they use particular signs to convey and understand meaning. In addition, because signifiers are considered to exist within the realm of the symbolic, that is, as abstract representations that refer to real-world phenomena, the systems of communication within which they are embedded can be thought of as relatively autonomous from any real-world referent. Given that there is no necessary relationship between the signifier and the signified, the actual choice of signifier is arbitrary. This is why various languages can have different words (signifiers) for the same object (the signified). Indeed, the signifier only has value when it can be differentiated from other signifiers and used to convey a particular signified again and again. All languages, then, depend upon the fact that we learn to recognize this difference between signifiers.

Now the very fact that communication can occur through signifiers that are fundamentally arbitrary implied for Saussure that a system, or set of rules, must exist by which people can indeed be taught to differentiate between signifiers, and to which all must subscribe if communication is to proceed unhindered. Just as chess and courtship (both systems of signs) are built around certain rules of the game (the moves of the knight, the lingering glance), so all languages are founded upon abstract regulations that shape the ways in which they are played, or manifested in practice. Within this conception, the underlying structure that allows communication to take place is called langue, while the actual practices by which communication takes place Saussure called parole. To sum up, for Saussure the elements of language constitute interrelated signs, whose mark or signifier is embedded in a structure of langue, which itself may be transformed through the practice of parole.

That Saussure's model could be applied to any number of sign systems in any language and across myriad communication systems accounts in part for its popularity well into the 1960s in a variety of disciplines, including literary theory and philosophy. Freudian psychoanalysis, in particular the analyses of dreams, was rooted in structuralism. So too was anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss's search for the organizing principles of culture. And, in some versions of Marxism, structuralism underwrote attempts to explain many aspects of social life as determined by the underlying mode of production. It was with these and other forms of structuralism that post-structuralism took issue.

Language and Discourse

Though elements of post-structuralism can be found in the work of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, its formal recognition as a body of theory can be traced to a host of more contemporary social, cultural, and literary theorists. Here, under the heading of language and discourse, both of which speak to underlying issues concerning epistemology, we discuss the work of two of the most important theorists, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Michel Foucault (1926–84). Later, in the section titled 'Materiality and difference', which addresses more avowedly ontological concerns, we take the opportunity to discuss the work of two other prominent post-structuralists, Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) (and colleague Félix Guattari, 1930–92) and Bruno Latour (1947–).

It was Derrida who, at a 1966 conference on structuralism in the city of Baltimore, introduced post-structuralist thought to an international audience through the presentation of a paper titled, 'Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences'. The major goal of the conference was to stimulate innovation in structuralist thought across a wide variety of disciplines. Yet, Derrida's paper (published in 1970 and reissued in 1972) critiqued the very notion of structure by analyzing the process of 'centering' upon which diverse forms of structuralist thought were constructed. Tracing back particularly significant manifestations of this centering process in Western thought, Derrida suggested that what seemed to be ontological securities, such as presence, essence, existence, cause, origin, substance, subject, truth, God, and 'man', were merely epistemological constructs handed down through generations of philosophers and scientists.

Specifically, Derrida noted that in the process of producing a structure's parts, all those elements that seemingly do not have some form of relation with its center must be excluded. Thus while the center is related to all of those elements within the structure, it is also held to be beyond the excluded elements, and therefore fixed and inviolable, at least with respect to those 'other' elements. However, Derrida argued that the structure could not exist without the accompanying exclusion, and this meant that the center was both within (i.e., a presence) and outside (i.e., an absent presence) at the same time, implying that a center is not really a center after all, but a contradiction, a force of desire or power rather than an ontological foundation. Another way of viewing his contribution is from the perspective of within: if centers rely on the exclusion of outside elements to produce structures, then they and their associated structures are dependent upon the 'outside other', or 'constitutive outside'. Derrida would go on to show how we can uncover the productive 'trace' of this 'other' within centers and structures so as to 'deconstruct' the effrontery of their claims to independence. In addition, Derrida explained how a structure paradoxically provides both the grounds and constraints for what he called the freeplay of the structure. This freeplay – that is, the

movement and change that determine how a structure unfolds – is both made possible and limited by the 'structurality' or centering of a structure, which contradictorily hinges on its fundamental immobility and reassuring certitude. As Derrida went on to note, such centering is the product of a binary – an either/or – epistemology. Such a way of thinking about the world stabilizes not only the meaning of one term, such as truth (a center relying on such 'parts' such as objectivity, facts shorn of ideology, etc.), but also, through the assignation of a periphery, defines an 'other' that falls outside of its purview, fiction. In a similar vein, binary thought produces sharp contrasts between essence and ephemerality, cause/effect and contingency/serendipity, substance and chimera, God and idol, and 'man' and nature.

Post-structuralists drew three important conclusions from this mode of thought. First, they maintain that in all of these binary systems, what appears to be the foundation for a system of thought is but a hypothetical construct, one that reveals more about the society that produced it than the supposed character of the real world. In this case, post-structuralists turn their attention to the production of centers, margins, and the boundaries that demarcate them. In recognizing centers and margins as products of an either/or mode of thinking rather than the natural state of affairs, post-structuralists are drawn to several key questions. On the one hand, they ask who has the social power to draw the boundary between a center and margin; on the other hand, they question to what end is any such system of differentiation directed. In recognizing categorizations as the product of social relations of power, attention turns to which social groups have the discursive resources to construct categories; that is, who has the ability to name the world? Thus, a major component of post-structuralist research involves inquiries into the categories that frame reality according to either/or binaries.

Second, binaries presume a totalizing epistemology, so termed because either/or thought can only posit a world in which everything either 'is' or 'is not'. Epistemologically speaking, the effect of binary thought is to constrain what can be conceived about the world. Now, in some instances binary thought can be productive, as in, for example, the 'freeplay' set loose in the formulation of computer languages that operate on an underlying system of ones and zeroes. However, in other instances binaries so stricture what knowledge is possible that they unduly limit what can be conceived in the world. In this way, the binary epistemology ultimately infuses ontological concepts (or what we presume the world to consist of, e.g., the individual vs. society, local vs. global, conscious vs. insensate, subject vs. object, chaos vs. order). Consider, for example, our understanding of phenomena as either natural or cultural. Such binary thinking will ultimately organize virtually all questions researchers

might want to ask about social or physical systems. These questions, however, can ultimately be exposed as circular in character, for, though researchers may think they are posing questions about 'real' categories, they are by default investigating the products of their own binary epistemology.

A third complaint about structuralist thinking is that it is not, in fact, as fully relational as structuralism claims it to be. For example, while Saussure's model assumes that language comprises an arbitrary system of signifiers whose elements become meaningful through their relation to each other (the word 'cat' does not sound like 'dog' and thus permits us to understand the difference), for him the concept of a feline, four-legged mammal (the signified) becomes the agreed upon, or correct, re-presentation (see below) of the real-world animal, or referent, independent of the existence of its canine variant. Using Derrida's critique of Saussure, however, we could argue that the mental construct of a feline is not grounded in the one-to-one relationship between it and the referent, but is definable only in relation to all other concepts that give feline its distinction by referring to what feline is not. Thus, feline is negatively defined in relation to a host of other concepts such as canine, leonine, equine, lupine, and bovine. Moreover, and this is the important point, all of these concepts, from feline to bovine, are themselves produced within a myriad of other relational fields of meaning, popular, as well as scientific. Rather than to assume a uniformity of meaning in the face of such complexity, post-structuralists point instead to contradiction, juxtaposition, bricolage, and imbrication. In this manner, post-structuralism throws doubt onto all certainties regarding researchers' ability to accurately represent reality, for our concepts do not simply re-present that reality, in the sense of mirroring their referent, but represent reality within a fully relational system of understanding that does not require the referent to be cognized in the same manner by all.

A second influential theorist of post-structuralism was the French philosopher-historian, Michel Foucault. Whereas Derrida focused on the dualistic presumptions of Western philosophy, Foucault undertook to problematize the production of modernist forms of knowledge, noting how 'Western' scientific ideas and practices since the eighteenth century produced a series of non-normal others, such as the insane, the abnormal, and the sexually perverted. In doing so, he drew attention to how this modernist undertaking has been underwritten by a particular conception of 'Man' (as Foucault invariably put it) as a unique being, capable of describing, explaining, and mastering the operation of body and mind, as well as society and nature. Hence, within these scientific analyses, the human subject is not only the object of her/his own understanding, s/he is also understood to

orchestrate the social and physical realms within which s/he lives.

In placing humans within these contexts, Foucault argues, modernist forms of knowledge necessarily establish a series of insurmountable paradoxes. First, s/he appears as an object to be studied empirically alongside other objects, but is also posited as the transcendental source from which the possibility of all knowledge can flow. Second, in determining the domain of conscious thought, s/he has also framed the unconscious. And yet, in presenting her/himself as the source of intelligibility, s/he must attempt to explain this latter realm; that is, to think the unthinkable. And third, humans conceive of themselves as the product of history, and yet posit themselves as the source of that very history. For Foucault, modernist sciences of 'Man' simply cannot produce a comprehensive account of their subject/object, and so must disintegrate under the weight of their own contradictions.

Foucault's own historical analyses can be considered a commentary on this same condition. Among the most important of his concepts is that of discursive practice. Put briefly, a discursive practice is a regularity that emerges in the very act of articulation. As such, it should not be thought of as a set of meanings that are somehow imprinted onto real-world phenomena. (To think this way is to rely on an idealist understanding of the mind as the source of knowledge, and presume an unwarranted distinction between mind and body, self and social.) For Foucault, by contrast, each articulation establishes the conditions of possibility for thought and action; that is, it posits what is appropriate and reasonable to be thought and practiced. As such, an articulation is more than mere communication – it is an active intervention in the social and physical realms. From this position, Foucault derived two analytic projects.

First, he noted that each articulation is produced and understood within a given context, such that it is afforded meaning. The kinds of articulations Foucault was interested in were those that had gained sufficient authority such that they were deemed to be valid even when they were taken out of context. That is, they had gained the status of Truth. Hidden in previous analyses of communication, argued Foucault, were the means by which these particular articulations gained distinction. Within a discourse, he maintained, a disciplining process takes place within and between strategies of power, which are all those techniques by which a statement is accepted as valid and appropriate, and by which that statement could not but be articulated in the way it was. In regard to social research, for example, these techniques would include empirical confirmation, dialectical argument, and phenomenological bracketing. Each of these allows for the privileging of some articulations over and above others as valid claims concerning the nature of 'reality'. For Foucault, power is considered within this context to

operate through discourse, and to be complicit with the production of specific forms of knowledge that not only claim to provide insight into how the world works, but which are also deployed in the active management of that world. Key to this process is the emergence of a specialized cadre of experts, such as scientists and educators, who draw on these bodies of knowledge to further enhance their own status by ensuring the diffusion of particular ideas and concepts through society. Importantly, this legitimacy ensues not from their 'personal' character, but from the positions they hold within an institutional framework, as well as within a given set of social relations. A discourse, then, is not something that is simply produced and received by people; rather, it is tied into a discursive site, such as a school, church, office, scientific laboratory, and so on, where knowledge is actively produced and disseminated.

Second, and following Saussure's focus on semiotics as a science of signs, Foucault interpreted the term 'discourse' far beyond speech to include the inscription of social relations (and thereby the exercise of power) on and through the body itself. The complex interplay of social relations of power both enables and constrains the body in certain ways: that is, the capacity of the body to be shaped and to act. Foucault refers to the emergence of what he termed 'technologies of the self' – disciplinary actions that have become taken for granted. These range from new standards of punctuality to the self-regulation of dress and hygiene. In making this argument Foucault's aim was not to reiterate the imposition of coercive power over individuals, but to show the tendency for modern-day power to be depersonalized, diffused, relational, and anonymous. Power is not held by one particular group, but rather is exercised through a series of everyday activities. For some critics, this position denotes a hopeless pessimism, in that power is understood to discipline and normalize more and more dimensions of everyday life. For Foucault, however, the means of resisting relations of power lie in the disruption of this daily performance. It is at this level, the site of the body itself, that resistance takes place.

The case studies Foucault chose to pursue, consisting of penal, education, and medical systems, focus accordingly on the ways in which the self is constructed through discursive practices. The ensuing histories are also, however, illustrative of Foucault's attempt to produce a body of work that does not operate according to modernist modes of interpretation. For Foucault, there is no necessary trajectory to history, nor is there a definitive causal mechanism, such as human agency, that lies at the heart of social change. Rather, in representing history, each mode of analysis – or genealogy – must be considered as conceived and articulated around present-day issues and concerns, such that succeeding analyses of the same topic must necessarily rewrite the past from the

perspective of the present. Nevertheless, his own project was to bring to light how particular clusters of discourse/ power worked to produce, fill, and maintain the categories by which we claim to know the world, such as culture, nature, history, geography, individual, society, modern, primitive, objective, subjective, and so on. All of these terms have an archaeology to them, by which Foucault meant a series of discursive formations, or epistemic spaces, within which these knowledges have been produced.

In sum, for Foucault, social researchers cannot secure, and therefore should not pursue, truth, at least when interpreted as a category with the status of a universal, timeless quality (that is, Truth with a big 'T'). This is because each society has its own regime of truth, the specifics of which are fashioned by: the types of discourses deployed (these can be legal, moral, rational, and teleological, among others); the techniques and procedures used to distinguish between true and false statements; and the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. It is at this point that we can see an affinity between Foucault's account of discursive practices and Derrida's concern to de-stabilize those centers – such as origin, subject, essence, and Truth – by which explanatory modes of analysis operate. And, as we shall note below, it is their shared concern to work against accepted ways of thinking, researching, and writing about the world that inspired an emergent cadre of post-structural geographers.

Materiality and Difference

As we mentioned in our introduction, a post-structuralist focus on language and discourse puts the point of emphasis on epistemology rather than ontology. However, it would be disingenuous, if not downright anti-post-structuralist, to assert a clean and neat division between the two, and indeed, as Chris Philo has intimated in a 1989 essay, it would be incorrect to locate a philosopher like Foucault in one camp or another. In his case, Philo argues, discourse is understood to possess a distinctive ontological status. Hence, Foucault's work can be read as an analysis of how the ontological is constituted in part by the myriad effects produced by discourse. Nevertheless, it is safe to suggest that for many geographers inspired by their work, both Derrida and Foucault were crucial in shaping their own analyses not of the way the world is (ontology), but with the power orientations and slippages at work in how we understand our worlds (epistemology). By contrast, Gilles Deleuze's explorations of the ontological status of pure difference have been understood as offering an influential counterpoint to the discussion so far.

Prior to Deleuze, accepted approaches to ontology preceded almost exclusively from the Platonic tradition,

a strategy describing what is in the world through formal, ideal categories. Such an ontology operates by describing orders of similitude, where the world is understood by isolating and organizing objects supposed to be of the same type into exclusive families. For instance, while for Plato there supposedly exists a perfect (though immaterial) chair form of which all actual chairs are but imperfect copies, chairs are nevertheless identified as members of that family by virtue of the fundamental characteristics that constitute their similarities to that form, their 'chair-ness'. The point behind the Platonic strategy is to find a way to account for everything that is in the world within our own finite and limited language and representation. Thus, he would suggest that there is a form to which every category of 'thing' corresponds: chairs, certainly, but also people, statues, dogs, and so on. This ontology can be termed idealist insofar as the forms are thought to be transcendent; that is, they precede their material incarnation, representing – within the world of forms or concepts – the totality of possible forms that substances might take. Thus, when a substance does take form, according to Plato, we identify what it essentially is by virtue of its similarity to a set of possible forms. This systematic or categorical approach has continuously dogged Western philosophy, insisting upon a structuring analytic that predetermines and limits what can be expected to be in the world.

Deleuze's establishment of an ontology of pure difference works against the popular tradition initiated by Plato. Inspired by several strands of minoritarian philosophical thought (encompassing work by Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson, to name a few), Deleuzean ontology describes not a world of similarities shared by static objects, but rather one in which all of materiality is continuously moving, mutating, and transforming, differentiating even from itself in a constant process of becoming. And yet, in working to avoid thinking about the world in terms of similitude, a problem arises in the apparent impossibility of ontological description, both in terms of: (1) the reliance of language itself upon similarities and categories, and; (2) the sheer impossibility of accounting for the ever-growing infinity of differentiations that are continuously unfolding. By contrast, Deleuze presents a world encountered from the perspectives of movement and force relations: rather than structured, whole objects (the human, the subject, what have you), there are continuously interconnecting multitudes of partial objects affecting and being affected by other partial objects, constituting – if only for a moment – assemblages that appear to cohere by working together or initiating processes that are specific to that relation.

Although he dismissed any such endeavor to produce titles or 'isms', Deleuze is often included among the ranks of post-structuralists because his anti-essentialist, assemblage-based approach to ontology is concerned

first and foremost with the introduction of newness and variation in thought and life. While many poststructuralist thinkers satisfy themselves by leveling critiques against the systematic and oppressive structurings that pervade social life, Deleuze sought strategies for thinking, living, and relating beyond these. Thought turned toward difference readies itself for encounters with random, alternative arrangements and events emerging through the dynamic, interactive encounters of materiality.

In this sense, Deleuze's philosophy should be considered an active one. Thinking about difference is a matter of asking what bodies can do, and from this springs a literalist conceptualization of ethics as a form of inquiry into 'what is to be done'. Certainly, we are inundated with any number of different norms prescribing to us what our bodies should be doing, through which, as Foucault suggested, we discipline ourselves and police our subjectivity. And, with Deleuze, we are explicitly challenged to interrogate such disciplinarity by experimenting with variations in thought and embodiment that might aid in uncovering what else can be done. Such experiments need not be immense or completely transformative, but should be predicated upon the understanding that a life presents a virtually infinite number of experimentations continuously conditioned by its orientations to and relations with other bodies.

Orienting inquiry toward what things do corresponds with another line of thought that challenges structuralist preconceptions of social life and science, especially spearheaded by Bruno Latour and broadly known as actor-network theory (ANT). This work addresses epistemological and ontological problems in the production of scientific knowledge by interrogating how such knowledge is negotiated and by challenging the limited, anthropocentric domain of agency in accounts of materiality. If Foucault was the historian of circulating discourses of power, Latour might be considered their ethnographer. By observing the generation and negotiation of scientific knowledge as produced through everyday lab life, Latour challenges modernist conceptions of truth and transparency in scientific fact by witnessing the ways that scientists, in the process of discovery, actually participate in the creative production of those truths. Rather than being something that preexists and is slowly uncovered through repeated experimentation (a modernist conception), a scientific truth is something that is invented and reworked through situated exchanges by members of the community. Thus, scientific knowledge is always an emergent discourse dependent upon not only other circulating (and equally constructed) knowledges, but also upon the varying positionalities and privileges of the scientists themselves, the vogue of scientific topoi, access to resources and funding, and so on.

At the same time, Latour draws upon something similar to Deleuze's notion of assemblage ontologies to extend the place of agency beyond the human to nonhuman objects that, through various connectivities, bring about certain events or results. Thus, just as we cannot deny the participation of the scientist in the production of scientific knowledge, we likewise cannot ignore the role of various objects (tools, for example) in the accomplishment of the same. To return to Deleuze, we might say that while our concern should still be with what a body can do, we must always keep in mind that no body acts in a vacuum. Rather, as Latour has explained, objects are always immersed in a complex network that is established through the interactions between and among its members. Because there are any number of activities and processes unfolding across this network, it becomes impossible to grant certain participants at specific sites within it (that is, humans) a causal agency over and against that of other participants (that is, objects) that play just as crucial a role in carrying out a desired end.

Such a recasting of ontology, whereby human beings are located alongside a host of nonhuman entities within a broad and complex network, or assemblage, does raise the question of whether or not ANT has taken a step back, philosophically speaking, by returning to the Platonian notion of similitude. Indeed, some have commented on the fact that ANT analyses do run the risk of treating all elements within a network in the same manner, wherein anything and everything has agency in the sense of having the capacity to act or intervene within a situation so as to produce a particular affect. And yet, it would be more in keeping with Latour's examination of agency to see this rather as a necessary entry point into a much more complex form of interrogation, wherein thought is given to how people and things exist in the world such that they are constituted with particular capacities for action, whether it be through focused and deliberate intent, the movement of certain parts, or even a passivity in regard to the actions of other entities. All of these are a form of agency in the sense that they can work to produce particular affects, but their specific manifestation and mode of operation is very much context dependent. And, we would suggest, it is this attentiveness to context that not only augurs a particular role for geographers, long concerned with this topic, in the continuing development of post-structuralist thought and practice, but positively demands it.

Post-Structuralist Geographies

Representation and Space

In the following discussion of post-structuralist geographies we echo the preceding sections, tackling first epistemic issues and subsequently taking on more

avowedly ontological ones. We begin, then, with a discussion of representation as a key concept for geographers interested in drawing upon, and contributing to, post-structuralist debates. Representation can be theoretically distinguished from re-presentation by reserving the latter's meaning as implying the impossible, namely, capturing and reflecting – as in confining and mirroring – a real-world referent in thought, language, and visual media. Representation, by contrast, refers to the social mediation of the real world through ever-present processes of signification.

By illustration, we can return to the relationships among signifiers, signifieds, and real-world referents. As should be clear, within post-structuralism such relations are not taken for granted; rather, they become foci of analysis in their own right. This is because signifieds are not presumed to stand alone, but are considered to be defined in relation to each other through the socially constructed discourses that give them their definition and character. As a result of the embeddedness of signifieds in discourse, no signifier can be presumed to stand in a one-to-one relationship with a real-world referent. And finally, since referents themselves are not understood as having essential qualities but are instead defined and refined within relational systems of difference (for example, not 'I, the cat…' but 'I, not dog, not bird, not child, etc.'), even the bedrock of real things are, under post-structuralism, no longer thought of as things in themselves. In light of this reconceptualization, post-structuralists refer to representational processes instead of re-presentation, and they direct their investigations toward an understanding of the mediating role of discourses in representational processes.

There are a number of implications to this theoretical position. First, post-structuralists take note of and critique forms of thought that distinguish between the real world and its mere re-presentation in communication, whether conceived in terms of language, sensory perceptions, or electronic media. As Deborah Dixon and John Paul Jones note in their 1998 essay, this critique is a source of continuing conceptual confusion between post-structuralists and other theorists, such as spatial scientists, since much traditional social thought is predicated on the very distinction between the real world of POEMs and their re-presentation in thought and language. Conflated with real/representation are other binary formulations such as materiality/ideology and concrete/abstract. For non-post-structuralists this distinction, and the impulse to resolve it, implies a faith in the possibility of unmediated re-presentation, wherein researchers might actually get it right. For post-structuralists, by contrast, there is no Truth lurking behind real-world objects. This is not to reject the existence of the world *per se*, but rather to maintain that the world can never be known in a manner that is not somehow already socially mediated.

What is more, any claim to know can emerge as complicit with authoritarian forms of power in which a particular group names and frames reality for all. And, it is this noninnocent character of constructs that points to the importance of all the other constructs and to the entire social context within which their interdependencies become fixed and stabilized.

Second, in taking into account these interdependencies, post-structuralists take note of both context and intertext. The former refers to the temporary stabilization of meanings drawn together in the articulation of a discourse that communicates those meanings in a sensible form by establishing differences among them. Context, then, 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 intercontextual 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. As used in Kolson Schlosser's article on the interplay between geopolitics and medical discourse, intertext is the relational field – of flows, imbrications, and concatenations – for the production of new contexts. To give an example, in reading a book, context might be temporarily established by an author who draws upon meanings established within a genre. The act of reading, however, involves the production of a new field of meaning by the reader within which those meanings are de-stabilized and restabilized yet again. In this view, and in virtue of the intertextual character of all communication, meanings cannot be permanently fixed according to: the intent behind their production; their content, genre, or mode of dissemination; or the perspectives of the reader. Thus, the meanings that adhere to signifieds cannot be presumed as fixed or fully present, but are always in process, awaiting their deployment in new contexts.

While the above points to the open and unfinished character of representation, it also suggests a problem for reflexive social analysts – that is, those willing to judge their own work within the purview of representation. Put succinctly, if representation within post-structuralism denies the disclosure of Truth, and if the subject is no longer speaking with the security and advantage of Identity, then how are we to trust our and others' analyses? Feminists have grappled with these issues at some length. One widely accepted response is to reflect on one's social positionality (white, homosexual, male) vis-à-vis researched participants and texts, recognizing that the outcome of those inquiries are influenced by the different standpoints that infuse the research process. However, others have argued, following post-structuralism, that the register of social experience that gives these standpoints their presumed stability (however temporary) is no guarantee of Identity. Moreover, in the wake of the 'death' (or dissemination) of the author, the

postmodernist claim to recover marginalized voices through a sensitivity to multiple knowledges becomes suspect. The differences that postmodernist inquiry seeks to activate will not be fully relational if inquiry is driven by an underlying faith in the researcher's ability to demarcate center from margin, or, for that matter, to fix the relationship between the real and the represented.

In considering these claims, some critics have responded with the argument that what is lost in the post-structuralist crisis of representation is any possibility of strong evaluation; in particular, post-structuralism is charged with relativism and nihilism. But while it is certainly the case that this approach eschews the notion of an external vantage point from which judgments concerning accuracy and ethicality can be made, this need not lead directly to either relativism or nihilism. This is because, first, the de-stabilization of centers – what has been termed in deconstruction as the 'cracking of nutshells' – is very much a political project in the way it points to the constructedness and, hence, the contingency, of all kinds of authoritative claims. To choose to undertake post-structuralist analysis is, therefore, already a form of evaluation and intervention. Second, we can acknowledge that post-structuralism holds that all evaluative-ethical projects, including those undertaken in the name of liberty, community, and democracy, can only be 'evaluated' within the particular spatial–historical contexts of their articulation. However, even though they exist as discursive constructs without guarantees – how could they be otherwise? – this does not imply the end of politics or of evaluation. This is because whereas in structuralist forms of inquiry the researcher unproblematically takes on the certainties invested in the roles of arbiter, analyst, and de-coder, in post-structuralism the researcher explicitly interprets, activates, and transmutes meanings and their contexts. Indeed, rather than presume to work within the domain of similitude, researchers understand and articulate their role as proliferating difference by acting out the multiplicities of a mobile researcher.

With these comments on representation in mind, let us now turn to a more explicit discussion of the spatialities of representation by outlining the emergence of a twofold agenda for geographic research: (1) to investigate the spatial character of discourses through an investigation of the geographic meanings embedded in particular representations and discursive sites, and (2) to understand the representational character of space itself. Regarding the first, we can assert not only that representations signify spatially, say by invoking particular places and stamping them (by placing them within a particular context) with specific meanings, but also that any signification or discourse is 'always already' spatial. How can this strong view of spatiality within representation be maintained?

An answer is to be found in the dialectic of space and social power elaborated by writers such as Michel Foucault and those geographers who have been influenced by his work. Foucault's work points to the indivisibility of space and social power – from the ways that social relations are constituted in and unfold through spatial distributions, built environments, and spatial significations, to the ways that space itself is socially produced through relations of social power. In this view, it is untenable to conceive of social relations of class, gender, race, or nation as falling outside of the purview of the spatiality through which they are practiced and reproduced in everyday life. Even the discourses of progress, morality, and reason (to name just a few) emanating from these relations are spatial – marking sociospatial constructs such as public/private, global/local, and chaotic/orderly. As Foucault's own empirical work has revealed, these discourses also carry with them spatial concatenations, attenuations, and disjunctures; that is, they mark the other spaces of immorality, insanity, and the abnormal.

The second moment in this agenda is to consider the representational character of space itself. It is worthwhile first to point to what can be termed a spatial epistemology; that is, our ways of knowing space. Under the aegis of Western reason, this epistemology has been suffused with ocularcentrism, Cartesian perspectivalism, and lineation. Whereas ocularcentrism privileges vision over other forms of knowing and is one basis for social power through surveillance, perspectivalism coordinates vision by situating the viewer from a vantage point above; lineation, meanwhile, is the basis for gridding social space – the Cartesian counterpart to categorization more generally. Any number of histories can be written about the imposition of reason's grid epistemology, from the configuration of social space in the projects of colonialism and nation building, to the carving of towns out of nature and bringing them together through systems of transport, to the policing and self-disciplining of bodies in the gendered microspaces of everyday life. Even our concept of scale – cascading as it does through the above examples – can be thought of as an outcome of the grid epistemology.

A relevant example of the differing material transformations wrought by successive articulations of a grid epistemology can be found in Foucault's commentary on eighteenth-century France, wherein a crucial shift occurred in regard to how, and by whom, space was conceived and discussed. Previously, space had been the domain of the architects, who envisioned the governed city as a metaphor for the governed territory. The primary spatial trope was one of penetration, whereby all of the city, and by projection, all of the state, was laid open to the regulatory surveillance and practices of the police. As the century progressed, new cadres of experts,

including engineers and builders, emerged as the authoritative sources of knowledge on transport linkages and planning. The associated discourses addressed space in terms of speed, mobility, and networks, and entailed a revisioning of the links between the exercise of political power and the lived space of both the city and the territory.

From this theorization of the ways in which spaces are already invested with epistemology we can proceed to rethink some of geography's key objects of analysis, such as landscape. Whereas previous theorizations understood landscapes to be the imprint on nature of a culture, or the effect of social process such as capitalism, post-structuralism has pointed to their status as a complex of significations and discourses that are intertextually bound with a host of other landscapes and discourses. The landscape-as-text metaphor thus sees place as intersecting with an infinite number of other texts and contexts, such that we cannot demarcate where one starts and another begins. These multiple sites of discursive propagation open a circuit beyond the earthiness of landscapes, seeping into other representational media such as film, television, cyberspace, the body, political discourse and other forms of speech, and written texts of all kinds, including maps.

Difference and Space

Much of geography's engagement with post-structuralism has revolved around issues of representation, as manifest in a burgeoning series of deconstructive analyses: in these, the seeming authority of particular discursive sites, such as institutions, built environments, and the media, to fix the meaning of objects, peoples, and places, and the relations between them, is undermined by reference to the roles of context and intertext, which allows for their (temporary) production, as well as their reinterpretation. Less attention has been paid to issues of ontology, which, it must be stated, has more often than not been analytically sidelined as a mere product of epistemology. This absence has led to the charge that deconstructive analyses are ontologically agnostic, caring little for the form and content of the material conditions that allow for discourses to be manifested (from pen and paper to landscape itself) and that allow for their dissemination.

In part, this absence can be laid at the door of the discipline more broadly, as geographers have commonly conflated these material conditions with the notion of a preexisting or 'given' Euclidean surface across which all manner of phenomena are arranged and rearranged, and across which social and environmental relations are played out. This presumption of a Euclidean surface pervades the discipline, as when we locate, map, track, and correlate various phenomena, and plays a

fundamental role in the operation of the grid epistemology, as described above. Despite post-structural efforts to point to the discursive, and thereby fundamentally arbitrary, construction of just such a space it has remained fairly impervious to critique and, hence, to analysis.

And yet, it would be wrong to suggest that post-structuralism is necessarily characterized by such agnosticism. In recent years the discipline has been witness to an emerging interest in how the 'nature' of materiality can be productively reinterpreted from just such a perspective. For the most part, this has taken the form of a decoupling of the link between the notion of materiality and that of Euclidean space and the simultaneous articulation of multitudinous spaces, continually produced and transformed through the work of people and things. That is, post-structural geographers such as Marcus Doel have begun to articulate these spaces – or spacings – as continually emergent rather than a static dimensionality. These spacings (and their associated timings, for the two can no longer be considered as separate, Euclidean dimensions) are constituted from a multitude of pre-personal and affective encounters and connections between and among human/nonhuman assemblages. As geographers such as Nigel Thrift note, many of these encounters confound and/or exceed those acts of cognition and description that are associated with deconstructive modes of analyses, which, as outlined above, tend to focus on the fixing and unfixing of meaning.

In formulating this notion of multitudinous spacings, as opposed to space, some geographers have turned to Deleuze's work on immanence, which is usually described as the reverse of the more traditional notion of transcendence. Transcendence finds its origins in theological, as well as philosophical discourses, in that it points on the one hand to a divine being that stands outside of and beyond the world, and on the other to the more abstract notion of a unifying principle – which may be divine but which may also relate to an idealist notion of the formative power of the human mind to imagine – that underpins all of the phenomena that make up that world. If we refer back to Deleuze's emphasis on difference, then we are reminded that this work is very much an effort to confront a Platonic, Western philosophy of representation, wherein all phenomena are considered but the contingent manifestation of a universal model or standard. For Deleuze, difference does not mean different in resemblance; rather, it refers to a radical alterity, wherein each encounter proceeds to alter the world around us and within us, producing something new rather than more of the same.

Because such changes are wrought without reference to an outside power, or universal reference, Deleuze's ontology can be called one of immanence, where the

distinctions that haunt transcendental thought (mind and body, God and matter, interiority and exteriority, and so on) are erased or flattened. Here, there are no preeminent forms, subjects, or structures, nor is there the development or organization of these; instead, we find haecceities (blocks of uniqueness) which, if they can be said to hold a property at all (a term that usually implies having something in common), hold the property that makes each individuation unique. This form of difference is continually renewed as haecceities become tendencies, forming complex assemblages of forces, particles, connections, affects, and becomings, relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness. They unfold within and through what Deleuze terms the plane of immanence, each discovering its own kinetic relations, as well as the relative limits of those relations; in effect, haecceities work to map their environment at the same time that both the environment and themselves are transformed through each and every encounter.

It is in this self-organizing immanence that we find Deleuzean- and Latourian-inspired rejections of fundamental spatial concepts that rely on transcendence. Most prominent among these is that of scale. In its usual, vertical/hierarchical form, scalar levels – whether fixed or in more contemporary theories as socially produced – are an invitation to think POEMs as nested from the local to the global, and everywhere in between (body, household, neighborhood, region, nation). In this layered imaginary we find ample opportunity to sort social processes, such as those driving economies and culture, into their respective levels, as if somehow culture might work at one rung (say, urban), while economy at another (say, nation). This segmentation, which belies the concrete and immanent material contexts within which things cultural and economic reside and do their work is, in turn, overcome by a further idealist maneuver: connecting the processes at one level with those at another, with clever opportunities for horizontal flows followed by displaced touchdowns, and for scalar jumping to different levels. However, from a post-structural perspective, the problem with such theorizing is precisely its reliance on a transcendental spatial imaginary, one that is detached from the actual sites in which concrete material objects and practices and their discursive counterparts are lodged – literally so, in the sense of being inserted into, and immanent with, dense unfolding of sites of social activity and material objects.

For example, to write as one might do of Wal-Mart's corporate strategies in terms of a global entity operating within an ever expanding international political economy, and to frame locational decisions as an example of the struggle between economic globalizations and the preservation of local cultures, is to miss the point that the former are just as local – just as embodied – as the latter.

They unfold differentially in sites and depend on the dispersed but nonetheless situated and materially connected traders who track the firm's stock exchange price signals in virtual reality (New York Stock Exchange (NYSE): Wal-Mart Stores (WMT)); on the janitors, furniture, toilets, geographic information system (GIS) experts, computer keyboards, secretaries, and calendars that are put to work in organizing the boardrooms that bring together the decision makers; on the last minute deals cut between the property owner, the real-estate developer, the city councilwoman, the transportation planner, and the president of the watchful neighborhood group; and all of them, in their turn, on the existence of that simple, Latourian object, the shipping container, invented only in 1956, and without which none of these dense objects and networks could have mobilized to enable the corporation to bring cheap goods from the social sites (factories) of China to the US in the first place. Globalization is not scaled; nor does it flow, untethered, like the airline route map. To the extent that we can call it anything meaningful after having rejected transcendence, globalization is a process in which materials, practices, and meanings travel long distances (or are taken by others) only to nestle up to one another in place. Even when these connectivities are at a distance – as when these discourses are linked by cell phones, the Internet, or the press – their site-specific materialities can always be traced: to the phone's network of transmission towers, to the servers that enable Internet transmissions, and to the materials employed in the printing and distribution of newspapers.

This understanding of radical alterity, or pure difference, stands in stark contrast to transcendent versions of globalization that our own cultured, categorized thought tends to turn toward in its search for order and sameness. One of the symptoms of this acculturation is a tendency to assume that what Deleuze refers to as the 'actual', that is a material world characterized by a multitude of groupings such as species, kinds, properties, spatiotemporal locations and subjects, constitutes all that is real and, moreover, is naturally grouped and sorted in this manner. Rather, Deleuze offers, this actual, material realm is but the contingent realization of what he calls the virtual, which is formed not from what is, but rather what can be. Here, the virtual is perhaps best considered a potential that, often hidden from our gaze through a cultural emphasis on order, can occasionally be glimpsed during moments of systemic change or bifurcation. In an ontology of immanence, it is the form of the relation between the actual and the virtual that forms the heart of an analysis. Hence, Deleuze's emphasis on experimentation can be understood as an attempt to further actualize the virtual realm, as expected identities are troubled by the occurrence of new sensations that defy identification.

Conclusion

As we have shown in this essay, one side of post-structuralism is dedicated to unsettling routine modes of social inquiry relying on handed-down concepts that purport to contain either essential truths (e.g., progress, reason) or that fixes the meaning of worldly objects and events (e.g., parts of nature, the definition of resistance). These structurings and the centering effects they produce are taken as significant objects of inquiry in and of themselves; accordingly, the aim of both Derridian deconstructive and Foucaultian genealogical analysis is to understand how, and with what effect, such concepts operate, and to whose benefit. This tradition of thought has been extremely helpful in rethinking many of the constituent elements of human geography. Our nodding acquiescence to repetitive invocations of scores of normalized categories has been profoundly shaken under post-structuralism. Terms such as community, nature, public/private, identity, scale, experience, space/place, culture, animals, development, history, justice, agency, authenticity, borders, citizen, technology, gender/sexuality, transgression/resistance, memory, and nation – and more – all have new, if unfixed, meanings. Even what it means to 'post' does not escape the critical gaze of post-structuralism! The movement has unhinged these concepts from their earlier-on securities, tossing them into a differential space of relational meanings buttressed by wide sociospatial–historical contexts and everyday social articulations; peering into that space we can examine their stabilizations and de-stabilizations, their inexact certitude, and their exacting uncertainties.

Meanwhile, a productive, political moment is seized upon in the ever unfolding and complex differentiation of social and natural assemblages. Post-structuralism rejects the notion that there is an ordered trajectory to the emergence and development of socionatural worlds. Concomitantly, it rejects any notion of continuity or order in history. Far from terrifying, our capacity for hope is meant to be expanded from this recognition, for it enables us to invite into play new worlds whose potential is always emergent in the transition from the virtual to the actual. It is this pulsing, vibrating, crumpled, and folded space, rather than the stable, transparent, and bidimensional one, that is both product and recipient of that transition. In the future, making sense of this new view of the possible will require us to revise the analytic metaphors necessary to describing difference, moving us from fixities to fluidities, from rootedness to mobilities, and from hierarchies to networks. And yet, as a 'post'

rather than an 'anti', this body of thought will always be very much embedded in a web of relations with respect to its other, structuralism, which is both its trace and its becoming-difference.

See also: Actor-Network Theory/Network Geographies; Deconstruction; Foucauldianism; Local-Global; Marxism/Marxist Geography I; Marxism/Marxist Geography II; Posthumanism/Posthumanistic Geographies; Structural Marxism.

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