

Guest editorial

What next?

The papers assembled in this issue of *Environment and Planning A* were written in response to a call for commentaries on the topic of 'What Next?', which also formed the title of a paper session at the 2002 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Los Angeles, California (the session and this special issue were coorganized by Mitch Rose). The question was intended to provoke reflection on the pasts and futures of geographical theorizing in light of some thirty-plus years of scholarly encounters with critical social theory. These engagements—or 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) if one reads them as disengagements—are well-known: initially involving Marxism, feminism, and phenomenology in the 1970s, they grew to encompass critical realism and structure–agency theories in the mid-1980s, and were followed by the rise of post-structuralist approaches in the 1990s. So, as we entered a new decade without a clear successor to poststructuralism, it was reasonable to expect that our question was posed with an anticipatory air: what new, cutting-edge theory could further facilitate geography's shift away from a naïve scientism and towards a reflexive, grounded problematization of the discipline's ontological and epistemological traditions?

And yet, our intention was not to be midwives presiding over the birth of the next great 'ism'. To the contrary, it was to provoke discussion over our sense of exhaustion surrounding the very process of theoretical engagement (and its results). In brief: conceptual shifts within geography have turned time and again on the analysis of ontological and epistemological binaries, a process of identifying, locating, and variously valorizing or marginalizing constructs and their supporting scaffolds (witness the paradigmatic turns that have ensued by opposing such foundational moments as law, explanation, and structure with their 'others'—anomaly, interpretation, agency). Rather than attempt to dislocate still another congealed opposition dominating geographical thought (for example, idealism–materialism, objectivity–subjectivity, order–chaos, discrete–relational, global–local, nature–culture, general–particular, determinacy–uncertainty, ad nauseam but, thankfully, not ad infinitum), we contend that it is this *form of analysis* that has led us to a state of diminishing theoretical returns in contemporary geography. What is more, even when scholars manage to locate a redemptive aspect in some previously downtrodden centre—by, for example, dusting off the concept of objectivity to reveal some of its positive qualities—the overarching mode of criticism remains the same: the play of one oppositional moment against another. In short, our now finely honed and well-rehearsed strategy of binary deconstruction–reconstruction has become conflated with the notion of theoretical 'development' itself, making it difficult to see how something 'innovative' can be recognized, articulated, and engaged outside of this practice. Let us turn to some of the background underpinning this state of affairs.

Set up by the setup

It is now commonplace in geographic writing to note that theoretical frameworks and methodologies—which collectively we will refer to as 'paradigms'—are constructed on a series of binary oppositions. These determine both the theorization of research objects (where ontology seeps into methodology) and our research stances toward them (where epistemology seeps into methodology). Over the past thirty years we have learned to examine the impact of binary formations on our paradigms, on the substantive theories embedded within them, and on our research objects and methodological stances. To make

brief an already well-known history, the general–particular, or ‘nomothetic–idiographic’, opposition was the most important binary distinguishing regional geography from spatial analysis—effectively the science war of the 1950s and 1960s (for example, Gould, 1979; Hartshorne, 1959; Schaefer, 1953). These debates also pivoted on the explanation–description opposition, but with the arrival of humanistic geography in the 1970s explanation eventually came to be positioned against interpretation. Humanism also brought forth a significant amount of work on the objective–subjective and discrete–relational distinctions through the concept of the lifeworld (Buttimer, 1976), which privileged the latter moment in both oppositions.

Under the influence of Giddens (1982; 1984), a number of scholars turned attention to the individual–society (or agency–structure) opposition and to the problem of integrating it with the space–time dualism (for example, Gregory and Urry, 1983; Pred, 1984; Thrift, 1983). Around the same time writers such as Harvey (1989), Massey (1984), and Soja (1980; 1989) attempted to interweave social and spatial analysis, giving rise to the sociospatial dialectic. The ontological distinction between materiality and discourse surfaced in Duncan and Ley’s (1982) critique of Marxist geography; it remains today one of the most trenchantly argued binaries (for example, Peet, 1998). Rose’s (1993) work on masculinist epistemology was also important, both for its contribution to the theoretical and substantive development of feminist geography and for its role in rethinking methodology throughout the field. Critical realism had a similarly wide impact: it privileged relational over discrete ontologies; it enabled a nuanced analysis of contextual or contingent explanations over law-like ones; and it led to a rethinking of scale through an integrated approach to the global–local dualism (Massey, 1993; Sayer, 1991). Not lastly, the 1990s witnessed a wide-ranging poststructuralist critique: determinations gave way to indeterminacies, certainties to uncertainties, truths to social constructions. Its effects were perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the destabilization of the nature–culture binary (for example, Demeritt, 1998; Willems-Braun, 1997)—long one of the most inviolable categorical distinctions within geography.

Though the above account skirts many interesting and important meso-level debates, it also shows, we think, that geographic debates over the past thirty-odd years have hinged on a few key binaries. And this leads us to our central claim: binary analysis now offers limited value for theoretical discussion in geography. There are, of course, good reasons as to why binary analysis has proven so useful, highlighting, if nothing else, the contingency and fluidity of theoretical discussion. For example, we know that binary oppositions are constructions, socially and historically situated, open to redefinition, and subject to valence reversals. We also know they are relationally constituted, defined by a process of negation in which the ‘outside other’ provides the raw material for the construction of any pole in an opposition, such that the boundaries between terms—whether defined by a dash or a slash—have only the appearance of clean separation. Yet, in spite of these open principles, it is also apparent that binaries can become rigidified, stabilized, and persistent conditions that can lead—and have led—to theoretical exhaustion.

What accounts for this congealment? First, binaries never stand alone. They are always embedded in a system of oppositional relations through which they share various cohesions and repulsions. In a previous paper (1996), we used Walter Benjamin’s metaphor of a constellation—and its attendant force field—to describe these entanglements (see Jay, 1992). The relations in this system, though always *potentially* in flux, are in practice stabilized by their inherently tensive character and by consistencies in definitions and research approaches (discrete ontologies, for example, are usually paired with objectivist epistemologies, and so on). Indeed, the traditional notion of paradigm is built on these co-certainties. Second, as the brief recounting above demonstrates, only a

Table 1. Important binary oppositions in geography.

Binary oppositions		
Epistemology	objectivity	subjectivity
	general	particular
	masculinist	feminist
	determination	indetermination
	certainty	uncertainty
	discrete	relational
	explanation	interpretation or description
Ontology	orderly	chaotic
	space	society or time
	nature	culture
	materiality	discourse
	discrete	relational
	society	individual
	global	local

limited number of oppositions have historically guided ontological and epistemological discussions in postwar geography (table 1; see also Sayer, 1991). The constellation we call paradigms, therefore, results from a relatively small number of stellar moments, and, as such, the combinatorial possibilities underwriting theoretical development are limited by the raw materials at our disposal.

Consider, for example, the structuring limits set in place by the account of (and for) geography’s ‘big four’ in figure 1: spatial science, critical realism, humanism, and post-structuralism. Within the binary system qua system, and given the frame set by the categorical designates (objectivity–subjectivity; chaotic–orderly), where is the room to maneuver? Put slightly differently, what binary can disrupt the two-by-two grid in figure 1? Even poststructuralism, the disruptive paradigm par excellence, fits nicely within the coordinates set forth in the table. Is it any wonder that it came along?

Third, and as we noted at the outset, theoretical critique is itself disciplined by binary analysis, for paradigms are fashioned and defended within the structures that make them meaningful and sensible. It is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to see how one could pose a ‘new’ concept or theory that falls outside of the terms of debate previously established. This is why it has been so difficult to subvert structuring by working ‘against the grain’: the process only reaffirms the legitimacy of its objects, as well as the representational modes through which they have been accessed. Hence, we have a key and often overlooked quality of deconstruction: even though we might successfully undermine the hubris of self-presence and identity of a center by finding the

		Ontology	
		Orderly	Chaotic
Epistemology	Objective	spatial science	critical realism
	Subjective	humanism	poststructuralism

Figure 1. Key binaries and paradigms in contemporary geography.

destablizing trace of the marginalized other, in doing so we nevertheless require, work through, and activate a structure. What we think of as ‘criticism’ is, therefore, nothing but a replay: centers do their work by marginalizing others; their others are asserted as new, destabilizing centers; and the replay is put in motion. In short, we have been set up by the setup.

Outside the box?

Of course, not everyone plays according to the theoretical and methodological rules set in place by binaries. Here we point to two methodological stances that strive to overcome the disciplinary effects of paradigmatic inquiry. First, there are those who deploy bricolage, a phrase initially used by Levi-Strauss (1966) to label the ‘pieced-together’ practices that provide solutions to a problem in a ‘concrete’ situation. As articulated by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), bricolage employs the methods and theories of various paradigms, when needed, to understand the material in question. There is more to the bricolage project, however, than the acknowledgment that the world really is messier than our theories of it (Mann, 1986). For the bricoleur must acknowledge the ontological realm as the point of origin for research design, such that the ‘facts’ of the case study determine the selection of particular, analytic concepts and techniques. Bricolage has much in common with the concept of ‘mixing methods’ advocated by Rocheleau (1995), whereby an assemblage of methods is deployed, such that the ensuing forms of data analyses can be compared against each other for corroboration. These impulses are shared with Kellner’s (1995) call for a ‘multiperspectival cultural studies’.

Bricolage has recently garnered support within the geographic discipline (see Kwan, 2002; Sheppard, 2001). The rationale for this adoption lies in the purported diversity of the research objects of the discipline and the distinctive approaches they demand. Importantly for our argument, however, bricolage does not necessarily allow for the problematization of a binary formulation; indeed, one can argue that it merely advocates the adoption of additional paired terms, drawn from the vaults of other disciplines, such that a more ‘rounded’ or ‘nuanced’ analysis can be produced.⁽¹⁾

Second, there is the concept of partial knowledges, whereby data collection and analysis techniques are understood to exist as part and parcel of broad-scale epistemological framings. Introduced through the work of Haraway (1988; 1991) and popularized in the discipline by Barnes and Gregory (1997), Rose (1993; 1997), and others, partial knowledge takes as the entry point for analysis the different data sets that can be derived from a case study analysis, noting the disjunctures that become apparent but also the politics underpinning the legitimacy and veracity afforded to each. This approach to knowledge formation has much in common with the feminist concept of nomadism, or ‘border’ crossing, which addresses the making of multiple connections between different disciplinary discourses. Similarly, one can point to the work of Nast (2001a; 2001b) on nodal thinking, whereby the object of analysis—in her case, landscapes—becomes a medium through which different stories can be ‘channeled’ and held in critical conjuncture with each other.

Of course, the point we made earlier in regard to poststructuralism holds equally well here, in that the concept of partial knowledge must work through established modes of inquiry in order to achieve a critical standpoint in relation to them. That is, it works

⁽¹⁾ And yet, for a more critical use of the term, see Hooper and Soja’s assessment of the work of Spivak: “Thinking synchronically, in the precise (spatial) circumstances of the present moment, Spivak positions herself as a *bricoleur*, a *preserver of discontinuities* an interruptive critic of the categorical logic of colonizer–colonized, elite–subaltern, global–local” (1993, page 195, emphasis added).

‘against the grain’, thereby calling into being the very epistemological frameworks it sets out to problematize. And yet, rather than bemoan the fact that one cannot simply reject the either-or imperative that lurks within any binary, *sui generis*, as inherently malicious, misguided, or masculinist, this analytic stance acknowledges and works with the ‘tyranny’ of binary thinking.

What next?

Here then is *our* answer to the question we have posed: “Nothing. We are now repeating ourselves.” We have come to this position in spite of the fact that binaries, as socially and relationally constructed, would seem to open up new and dynamic fields of inquiry. Our view, however, is that the relations among oppositions have long since been stabilized by the gravitational force field of research practices that hold them together as systems, and that the form of binary analysis employed in most social theory (that is, construction–deconstruction–reconstruction) has long since worked its way across the limited number of possibilities. It is difficult, in the words of the business world, ‘to think outside the box’.

And what do our colleagues make of our question? Not surprisingly, given the ambiguous character of the question itself and the diversity of theoretical positions occupied by the respondents, their analytic targets vary. Some speculate on the future direction of a particular substantive subfield and the placement of their own work within this context. In this issue Duncan and Duncan, for example, focus on the uneven development of cultural geography, noting that some key binary formulations remain to be addressed within both popular culture and academia. They take to task calls by some for the concept of ‘culture’ to be abandoned because of its variously ‘holistic’ or ‘amorphous’ character (for example, Mitchell, 1995). They respond by noting the manifold contexts within which this term is given meaning and the need to acknowledge particular ‘real world’ usages of the term—for example, the ‘culture wars’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’—such that they can be critically engaged with. Oftentimes these usages are underpinned by a binary logic that valorizes particular peoples and places, such as ‘Western culture’ versus ‘native primitivism’. It is also important for fellow academics, they argue, to acknowledge the binary formulations at work in their own critiques of culture as a concept, including, for example, the culture–nature divide and the culture–economy divide. For the Duncans, a productive line of inquiry remains the question of how culture, which in principle is fluid and flexible, becomes rigidified, stratified, and hierarchialized:

“Cultures can be thought of in terms of processes and flows, or as webs or networks of human and nonhuman interaction. If change, process, fluidity, heterogeneity, and transformation are our basic starting ontological assumptions then what becomes remarkable are those things that are relatively stable and coherent such as organizations and institutions that become entrenched over time and which generally hold their shape and content through time and across space. These are what need to be explained. How is coherence accomplished?” (2004, page 397).

In similar vein, Gibson-Graham focus on the contributions poststructuralist thought has made to area studies, as well as on what might follow from its inevitable supercession. Their own long-standing interest in the production of discourses of economic difference that can represent (and perform) outside of the category capitalism is manifest here in a short commentary on the Papua New Guinea oil-palm industry. With this in mind, they point to the uneven application of poststructural thought to area studies, wherein some but not all of the prevailing binaries that constitute fieldwork sites—such as nomothetic–idiographic, modern–premodern, hypothesis testing—case study—have been challenged:

“Poststructural area studies has left capitalocentrism intact, and perhaps even strengthened it—ironically buttressing Eurocentrism with the one hand while undercutting it with the other. This feature is glaringly visible to us as theorists who have been principally focused on moving beyond capitalocentric representation. The poststructuralist emphasis on discourse and deconstruction has provided us a means to destabilize the fixed identity of capitalism (as necessarily and naturally hegemonic) and to open the economic field to difference outside the binary frame” (2004, page 410).

For Gibson-Graham, it is important to acknowledge how such binary-driven, capitalocentric assumptions can be actively challenged through what they term ‘post-structuralist action research’, but also how that action research can generate new modes of thought and practice. The field site can become an encounter, they suggest, in which one can experience creation rather than mere recognition via the testing or correction of theory.

Laurier and Philo consider the conversations, hybridizations, and ways of investigating that can ensue from conjoining Foucault’s archaeology with Garfinkel and Sack’s ethnomethodology, in that, whereas the former works to a historicism that ethnomethodology lacks, the latter can serve to localize the grand periodizations of Foucault’s histories. They go on to suggest a series of complementary epistemological and methodological stances, such as a deep appreciation for what is abundantly *there*, awaiting acknowledgment and analysis:

“There is a kind of existential priority running through Foucault’s work—he insists that he is *haunted* by the existence of things—and those of ethnomethodologists, which constantly turns them toward studying *what* exists. This in no way minimises the access to the problem of social order, as social order is taken to be at work at all points, particular practical solutions being produced everywhere and at all times. What is important is to assemble a corpus, because from a properly assembled corpus an investigator acquires not just, say, ‘data’ but also a feel for how such ‘data’ are possible” (2004, page 429).

In sympathy with both strands of thought–practice, Laurier and Philo eschew programmatic statements that would direct or prohibit others from undertaking particular kinds of research in particular ways. Rather, the question of ‘what next?’ is “more likely an invitation for something else to come along which we *really* do not *yet* know” (page 433).

Ernste also looks to future conversations involving the work of Foucault. He points to a common ground between Foucault’s work on the technologies of the self and that of the action research school. In the former, individuals are understood to have the power to define their own identity, to master their body and desires, and to forge a practice of freedom. The latter assumes that people live in an interpreted world of subjectively and collectively constituted meanings and, moreover, that they have the decision power to reinterpret those meanings. Ernste suggests that the work of Plessner provides a framework through which this shared understanding of the ‘fictional’ self can be moved forward: Plessner, Ernste notes, distinguishes human beings from animals according to the ability of human beings to:

“... negate her or his worldly being... He or she can refuse, resist, destroy, change, make, create, construct himself or herself and the world around. In this ability to say no (or yes) lies the necessity of making choices and of the freedom of will along with an awareness of the contingency and ambivalence of these actions... The human being is both natural and artificial. In both, however, the human being never fully succeeds and never finds a peaceful home” (2004, page 444).

Ernste sees a fundamental tension, or 'distance', between the everyday pragmatics of performative acts, gestures, and desires and the incomprehensibility of the self-consciously positioned human being; it is this tension that compels people to go on making sense of the world.

Other papers address the question of 'What next' itself. Doel, for example, makes the point that such a phrasing has an air of expectancy and anticipation around it. He picks up on the exhausted tone of the question, locating within it an uncomfortable restlessness that ensues when one has become dis-attached from a prior commitment:

"When one is deprived of one's fetish, one loses not only that fetish but also oneself.

It is fatal. Whence the unhappiness of being between images, between metaphors, between concepts, between paradigms, between applications, between problematics, or between communities. It is like being between jobs—a euphemism for unemployment. One is 'out of work' and 'not in use'" (2004, page 453).

The question presupposes some form of context (but what?) wherein it makes sense (of what?), and demands some form of action (but what?). There is a sense of urgency to this question, he suggests. Positing that an answer to such questions would require the taking on of either a reckless or a despotic persona, Doel prefers to maintain the open-endedness of the "?"—that is, to maintain suspense without the corollary of anticipation. In part, such a stance is chosen because it is seen to buttress an ethico-political understanding of a community of scholars that resists the forces of unification, such as the general call for an answer to 'What next?'

Rose also takes issue with the notion of summoning forth a 'what' to succeed that which has gone before. His response is to draw a parallel between Derrida's heralding of the 'end' of scientific certainty over thirty years ago and the current sense of malaise regarding the future direction of the discipline. For Rose, the notion of a deconstructive critique is accompanied by a recipe for improvement, offering the promise of an 'exit' from traditional social science. And yet, because these critiques must necessarily work against the grain of such strictures as the search for truth and authenticity, they cannot fulfill this promise. In consequence, the 'end' of traditional social science is forever delayed. In order to exit this exit strategy, we must disavow the critique of representation and 'reembrace' metaphysics, which Rose describes as a fundamental social activity. This, he suggests,

"... is an attempt to engage how we and others exploit the openness of social life and yet simultaneously nurture it as something closed; how we hold on to a world we continually take apart; how we simultaneously take advantage of and protect ourselves from the abyss we continually fall through. Most importantly, however, it is a means of recognising how our own theories and ideas about the world are themselves only ever systems of embrace. They are a way of getting on with life: a means of holding on to a world that perpetually overwhelms and eludes our grasp" (2004, page 466).

For Rose, it is axiomatic that we desire to live with the notion of wholeness—with undeconstruction—and it is this fundamental form of performativity that pulls at our attention.

Castree and MacMillan concur that, although much postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial work has taken the unreflexive deployment of representation to task, we have reached a theoretical and methodological cul-de-sac:

"What would one more decoding of a sign, symbol, or metaphor achieve? What 'value added' was to be got from permitting ever more narrowly defined 'others' the right to be represented?" (2004, pages 471–472).

In contrast to Rose, however, they suggest that ennui has set in because such bodies of thought fail to appreciate the need to articulate a political response to the deployment

of representation by and within society, particularly in light of the many silenced voices (including nonhuman phenomena) therein:

“To be sure, representation is not everything, and it is only one dimension of politics (broadly conceived). But it certainly should not be subject to the ‘been there, done that’ attitude that often accompanies academic innovation” (2004, page 474).

For Castree and MacMillan, while some strands of thought, such as some feminist theory, do succeed in producing original ways of thinking and doing research, it would be as well for the majority to eschew the search for the ‘new’ and instead finesse current theory in light of new empirical case studies.

Last but not least, Waterstone’s paper charts a similar sense of frustration but, drawing on the work of Gramsci, he attributes this to a prevailing hegemonic regime whereby the ‘academic’ is perceived as the arbiter of theoretical discussion. Moreover, there is a tendency to debate the current state of affairs as though geography were somewhat cut off from the rest of the world; contributors, Waterstone argues, tend to dwell on internal structuring moments and the specifics of policy relevance. In the process the role of the academic as *the* producer of ‘new’ theoretical formulations goes unremarked:

“I do want to argue against further theoretical reformulation, to the extent that it keeps us (pre)occupied with ‘theory building’ at the expense of moving theory into practice. It is interesting that, even when questioning other containments embodied in our ‘professional practices’, we rarely refrain from a kind of ritualistic obeisance to the ‘production of new knowledge’” (2004, page 483).

Waterstone does not question whether or not ‘new’ theory can be developed (though certain refinements to Marxism, such as discourse analysis, would be useful in deconstructing particularly virulent ideologies); rather, he is concerned to point out the ‘invisible’ binary at work in academic labor, namely theory–action.

Clearly, other summative points and linkages can be drawn from the following papers. There are a plethora of provocative contrasts and juxtapositions that can be accomplished via a reading of these in the order presented (or transposed), not solely in regard to the arguments presented but also in their differing empirics where offered. Where everyone seems to have reached an agreement—as if we need that to be a measure of success—is the absence of any sort of anguished or concerned tone about the status or future of something called geography. If that is a thread that links any number of theoretical and methodological approaches in a post-poststructuralist geography then the years of working toward them have certainly been worthwhile.

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