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What is This?
towards knowledge and insight with one another, often preferring the almost monumental quality emanating from such claims. Or we have simply abdicated the claim to claim, opting to celebrate the ‘heuristic’ qualities embedded in our published research. Either way, the epistemological door opened up by Dear in 1988 still designates a possible path largely untravelled within human geography. Dear, I am afraid, must bear some of the responsibility for this: the all-too-easy oscillation between an embrace of postmodernism and a rejection of relativism in the paper legitimized and facilitated such a position as an epistemological possibility in the eyes of many readers. Key to this was a shift in emphasis from epistemological differences (which appeared mostly as non-negotiable positions motivating particular approaches to the construction of geographical knowledges) to ontological foundations (which, almost by definition, must be shared by all). However, contrary to what Dear implied, these latter can only ever be ascertained as indeed providing a common bond of sorts by being assessed with the help of epistemological means (and this emphatically includes the ‘time-space tapestry’ that seems to emerge as the bedrock of ontological communalities in Dear’s paper). Otherwise, any statement about ‘ontology’ remains a mere assertion of faith – or of unfounded optimism. Or both. Either way, it simply pushes problems sideways while, and this surely is to be cherished, establishing dialogue. Strategically, such a move towards re-establishing communalities may well be justifiable: a discipline under threat in many places may not be able continuously to critique its own foundations. But the ability to critique is also a sign of maturity and self-esteem and as such as good a measure of the intellectual health of a discipline. In many ways, the celebration of this ability to renew and regenerate geography, especially when deprived of the optimism that motivated many a call for renewal, may well constitute the emotional legacy of Dear’s paper.

A re-assessment would be incomplete, however, if it were exclusively to focus on the content of a paper; lacunae are just as telling and should always merit a closer inspection. In hindsight, it is perhaps all too easy to note or even to lament the all but complete lack of any ‘culturally inspired’ line of argumentation in Dear’s paper. This ‘absence’ may be surprising given the emerging overarching importance of a ‘new’ cultural geography at the time of writing and well into the new millennium; Peter Jackson’s (1989) Maps of meaning – another milestone recently revisited in the pages of this journal – was after all published all but in tandem with ‘The postmodern challenge’. Funnily, it was this absence that for many of my generation working in human geography since the publication of Dear’s paper would become an implicit or explicit context in which to conduct human geographic research: a rejuvenated ‘cultural’ arena not anticipated by Dear pragmatically became a common ground of sorts. Did he see it coming and chose to look elsewhere – or was the ‘cultural turn’ (as many have suspected) really a British phenomenon to the extent of being invisible in Southern California?

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**Author’s response: postmodern evils; postmodern lives**

Neil Wrigley and I were wandering inconclusively around Llandaff. I had just presented a version of ‘The postmodern challenge’ at a UWIST seminar, and Neil was persuading me to publish the piece in the issue of Transactions that would inaugurate his editorship. I happily accepted the invitation, pleased that he was willing to risk a paper that was as likely to offend as to inspire (see Wrigley, 1988, for his reasoning on this). I knew that publication in the Transactions ensured that a lot of people would notice the article even if they did not
read it. I would write in an accessible style to engage the widest audience, and frame the issue as having discipline-wide consequences. I chose my title carefully. Over the years, many have expressed a preference for my 1986 article in Society and Space, ‘Postmodernism and planning’, but that was aimed at a specialized audience already conversant in social theory (Dear, 1986). The Transactions effort would be different; I intended to wrap intellectual explosives around the corpus of human geography.

Re-reading the essay two decades later, I blanch at some of its more outrageous moments, but mostly I smile at its cheeky provocations. Recall that in 1984 I had encountered Jameson’s famous article on postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1984). Truth be told, I regarded it as a glorious mish-mash, but its astonishing range and versatility revealed an irresistible intellectual terrain that turned my head. Recall too that in 1985 I had come to Los Angeles, and that made my head spin. As Alexander Pope might have said, I drank deep at the postmodern spring, just as thirstily as I had earlier quaffed quantitative geography and Marxism.

Thanks to Ron Johnston, Marcus Doel and Ulf Strohmayer, I am now looking back at what may be a ‘classic’, but is certainly a well-cited publication. Most striking about these two commentaries is their concurrence that the lessons of ‘The postmodern challenge’ have been thoroughly absorbed into geography. Strohmayer refers to postmodernism’s ‘taken-for-granted’ quality; Doel claims that postmodernism has sunk into our ‘disciplinary [political] unconscious’. I wonder if these claims are accurate?

Postmodernism is still too readily dismissed by many geographers. In some university departments, it is simply absent from the curriculum, including courses that purport to survey the field. (One incoming graduate student was proudly informed by a senior professor: ‘There are no -isms in this department!’) Many students discover postmodernism fortuitously by searching independently beyond their curricula; and to this day students gravitate to my graduate classes because their home departments – including history, sociology, and urban planning – are openly hostile to it. This is not because postmodernism is difficult. In my undergraduate freshman class on geopolitics, students easily pick up on the need for a relativistic outlook vis-à-vis the contemporary world. No, we must look elsewhere for the reasons that postmodernism is dismissed. These might include: an ideological predilection against relativism; discomfort with postmodernism’s apparent political indeterminacy; a sense that pomo is no longer fashionable; or simply an unwillingness to take the time to learn it. All these are defensible positions, even though I consider them inadequate. What is completely indefensible is the colleague who dismisses postmodernism without a hint of engagement.

So, postmodernism in geography might go deep, but I doubt it goes wide. This is perhaps why I was most touched, in Ulf’s comment, by his reference to the putative ‘emotional legacy’ of ‘The postmodern challenge’. He is referring to its ‘celebration’ of our ability to ‘renew and regenerate geography’. It is heart-warming to think that, years later, this spirit may yet be infectious. But another legacy Ulf identifies is my complicity in perpetuating disciplinary fragmentation by legitimizing an ‘anything goes’ response to relativism. He may be right, but the cacophony of voices associated with a resurgent geography (for that is what it is) should not be conflated with incoherence. Look, for example, at the emergence of a ‘postmodern geomorphology’ – my term – in Bauer (1996) and Sherman (1996); or consider the energetic ways in which the GIS community has responded constructively to the challenge from social theory (eg, Poore and Chrisman, 2006). Despite the misgivings expressed earlier in this paragraph, these trends might presage a new breadth in postmodern geography paralleling its demonstrable depth.
Most appealing in Marcus Doel’s meditation is his emphasis on becoming. If he is correct, then a deeply embedded postmodern (un)conscious is already inflecting the ‘lines of flight’ toward a new disciplinary identity. Still, Marcus is critical of my essay’s ‘triple failure’ which paradoxically he identifies as a source of its ‘classic’ status. I am somewhat bemused by this sleight of hand. As he observes, I had/have no wish to police the discipline; and I deliberately left many tasks unfinished, trailed many hooks, so that anyone could engage the article were they so inclined. But I thought I was being fairly specific about origins, consequences, and futures (or if you prefer: archive, currency, and lines of flight). Of course I am unclear about exactly what we are ‘ceasing to be’ or ‘in the process of becoming’, and I can be persuaded that a Deleuze-Doel lens is one profitable approach to this visioning process.

Oh, and yes, Marcus, I did hold a brief for structuration theory in the 1980s. It still seems valuable to me as a way to construe the structure-agency problem in social theory, and a useful device in approaching the empirical. And yes, Ulf, I left out the new cultural geography. My reason for sidestepping the ‘cultural’ was because in geography’s past it tended to encompass everything beyond ‘nature’, ie, the entirety of what we now call human geography. I tried to avoid other over-familiar terms in the essay for analogous reasons. But, in retrospect, overlooking the new cultural geography was a dumb thing to do. *Mea culpa*!

Together, Doel and Strohmayer bring freshness and vitality to what could easily have degenerated into a boozy wake. They distil from the antiquarian an energetic contemporary spirit and dialectics of intellectual and social change. We concur that the project of reconstructing human geography will never cease; we will go on becoming despite the malodorous efforts of those who resist. Yet both my critics hint that the future of the paper entitled ‘The postmodern challenge’ is as a historical marker. If so, then I am content. But it would be a mistake to assume that the challenge itself is obsolete, for, while it may no longer be fashionable to flirt with postmodernism, this is not because everything has been settled. For example, my division of postmodernism into style, epoch, and method has proven especially durable, because:

(a) we regularly confront the necessity to read the altered states of text and artifact in landscapes; (b) we are in the midst of an Information Revolution that is likely to prove as dramatic as the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions that preceded it; and (c) the ontological and epistemological constructions of postmodernism have deeply eroded many centuries of tradition in western thought, and, like it or not, these traditions are simply not retrievable without drastic modification, if at all. Do not misunderstand this point: you can retreat to familiar certainties if you so choose (all that is required is a closed mind); or you may force people to abide by your certainties (a syllabus or gun will do the trick). In the academy and politics, such things happen all the time, usually with deleterious consequences. But such behaviors cannot eliminate the postmodern challenge: relativism and difference will continue to exist despite the most extreme forms of intellectual cleansing. Thus the political project of postmodernity – including culture wars, clashes of civilizations, hegemonies based in exclusionary faiths of all kinds – seems today more than ever relevant.

So the ‘challenge’ still stands. Are we ready at last for a discipline-wide conversation on the potential of postmodern thought to reimagine The Geography? Such a conversation would grant that postmodernism, properly applied, is not a veiled crusade favoring some new hegemony. At its simplest and most fundamental, it is about conversing across persuasions; about the futility of claiming primacy for a preferred theory or searching for a grand theory of everything; and about a commitment to polyvocality in both theoretical and empirical realms. Most of the gains in human geography during the past two
decades have been nourished by metaphor, contingency, and difference, including the rise of the cultural to offset the economic, the reassertion of space over time, and the global-local dialectic. The gains of the past decades should be treasured, but they are only an opening.

Ours is a relativistic world. It requires a willingness to confront the dilemma (raised persuasively by Isaiah Berlin among others) that our alternative world-views are in some ways profoundly incommensurable. Every individual has her/his own moral compass. Now, more than ever, postmodernism teaches that those with whom we disagree are not buffoons, cowards, or terrorists, despite the labels we foist on them. The academic and political imperative is to learn from difference, to deal with disagreement. These acts are truly becoming, in both the active and adjectival senses of that word.

Too often in the academy and the world, the *lives* of those who engage postmodernism are regarded by others as *evils* even though this simple anagram shows that we are talking about the same thing.

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