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What is This?
Classics in human geography revisited


Commentary 1

In every apparatus, we have to distinguish between what we are (what we already no longer are) and what we are becoming: the part of history, the part of currentness. History is the archive, the design of what we are and cease being while the current is the sketch of what we will become. Thus history or the archive is also what separates us from ourselves, while the current is the Other with which we already coincide. (Gilles Deleuze, 2006: 345)

Once again the editors have identified a ‘classic’ in the human geography literature, and they have asked a couple of commentators, of which I am one, to focus on its immediate and longer-term impact. When confronted by the need to establish the impact of a paper, I instinctively call upon the good people at the Web of Knowledge®, whose database currently contains 106 citations of Michael Dear’s 1988 paper ‘The postmodern challenge’, the most recent of which dates from 2004. As is so often the case, however, I suspect that most of these citations merely mention the paper rather than use it. Given its delicious title, this would be entirely appropriate. Although it was published an eternity ago, the phrase ‘postmodern challenge’ readily comes to mind. Should one wish to mention the stir of postmodernism en passant, so to speak, one could do worse than cite Dear, 1988, in parentheses (although it is worth mentioning in passing that many writers prefer Dear, 1986).

Let me be frank. The postmodern challenge to human geography has more or less sunk without trace. Few of those writing today refer to the postmodern, and those that do rarely deploy it in order to frighten anybody. Nowadays, this anachronistic word is more likely than not to raise a smile borne of nostalgia, and the challenge itself has become little more than an occasion for a paragraph or two in one of those potted histories of the discipline that move seamlessly from one hyperbolic revolutionary uprising to another.

Despite being much maligned and invariably misunderstood, postmodernism has sunk without trace not because its challenge was ultimately ineffectual, but because its challenge was overwhelmingly successful. Who, today, does not aspire to be sensitive to difference, otherness, and alterity? Who, today, is not suspicious of grand narratives, totalizing claims, and unsituated knowledge? And who, today, truly believes that we were ever rational, edified, and modern? Only fools and despots lack the good grace to be modest in their theoretical, explanatory, and normative ambitions. To all intents and purposes, postmodernism, like humanism...
and Marxism, has sunk into our disciplinary unconscious.\textsuperscript{3} While it might not manifest itself as such, it expresses itself in almost everything that we think and write. ‘In one sense, we are all postmodernist now’ (p. 272).

Re-reading Dear’s paper in the wake of postmodernism, I am struck by the fact that the paper does not hinge on postmodernism.\textsuperscript{4} The stir of postmodernism – which Dear (1994) elsewhere characterized as a ‘tidal wave’ – turns out to have been a loss leader. Drawn in by the threat (or lure) of postmodernism (‘Anything goes!’ as so many dimwits used to say), Dear hoped to entice the reader into buying an altogether different (and much more costly) enterprise: a fully reconditioned human geography (which I for one found hard to swallow). Like a vanishing mediator, the postmodern challenge provided the occasion, but not the basis, for refurbishing human geography. Rather than commission the services of Lyotard & Assocs, however, Dear turned to Giddens Inc. (Given my own experience of the latter’s shoddy workmanship, I expected that the rebuilding project would not go well.) Hereinafter, postmoderism is effect-ively handed over to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984; Gregory and Urry, 1985).

- The occasion (or the recent past):

  \textit{[P]ostmodernism arose as a reaction to ... a menagerie of internally-consistent yet mutually-exclusive conversations in social theory ... Dialogue between these diverse modernist epistemologies was rare. Under the guise of tolerance, a comfortable pluralism was eventually established. Postmodernism destroyed all that.} (p. 267)

- The site (or the archive):

  Social theory is concerned with the illumination of the concrete process of everyday life. Human geography, therefore, can be construed as that part of social theory which focuses on the spatial patterns and processes which underlie the structures and appearances of everyday life ... The focus on time and space places a new prominence on history and geography – the two disciplines with special claims to time and space. (p. 267)

- The project (or the near future):

  Unfortunately, few in geography have yet appreciated the enormous consequences of the convergence of time-space analysis in our cognate disciplines. \textit{It promises to resituate geography at the very centre of a newly defined paradigm of human inquiry.} (p. 267)

- The plan (or the current):

  Consider once again the time-space tapestry. Contemporary social theory has two themes which are important in understanding how this tapestry evolves: structure and agency; and society and space. (p. 269)

- The contractors (or the Other with whom we already coincide):

  \textit{[T]hree primary processes ... structure the time-space fabric. In no particular order of priority, these are: political, economic, and social ... These processes define what I consider to be the pre-eminent sub-disciplines in human geography: economic geography ... political geography ... and social geography.} (p. 270)\textsuperscript{5}

Given this architectural undertaking, it is hardly surprising that Dear should begin his paper by mocking the unbecoming\textsuperscript{5} ‘state of human geography’ in his ‘report on geographical knowledge’. Instead of a tripartite workforce that was ready, able, and willing to unravel the primary structu-rature of the time-space tapestry, he encountered – by way of the Association of American Geographers’ 37 ‘speciality groups’ and its 57 ‘topical proficiencies’ – ‘an eclectic mish-mash of old and new, pertinent and irrelevant, the quirky and incomplete’ (p. 263). Dear was not so much attempting to ‘police’ the discipline, as some respondents have contended, as rationalize its madcap division of labour in order to maximize its efficiency in the knowledge economy. Biblical geographers, historical geographers, military geographers, regional geographers, and sports geographers\textsuperscript{7} are not deviants in need of punishment, but a truly redundant workforce in need of retraining and rehabilitation.
Dear’s emphasis on the management of intellectual labour is not entirely surprising. The paper dates from the 1980s, after all. We had already waved goodbye to the working classes as would-be agents of revolutionary transformation, and we had yet to redeploy Nature, the body, and everyday life into the vacated role of resisting the despotic ambitions of capitalism. What is surprising, however, is that Dear did not apply the logic of laying off ‘regional geography’ and ‘historical geography’ (on the grounds that their work was already accounted for by the accomplishments of the three primary subdisciplines) to the discipline as a whole. For were it truly the case that all of social science is concerned with time-space then Geography itself would be an overdetermined and redundant, rather than a privileged and pivotal, occupation. Here, as elsewhere, the centre is not a site of great power, but a place of absence and obsolescence. To cut a long story short, I would have liked to have been able to report that in the intervening decades structuration theory had also sunk without trace, but sadly its influence has remained all too apparent as so much of human geography has continued to dissolve into perpetual practice, as exemplified, for instance, by the self-conscious banality of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005).

Rather than account for human geography as a more or less useful workforce in the knowledge economy, it might be more productive to think of it as an apparatus. While Dear took it as self-evident that the heterogeneity of the apparatus was an indication of systemic malfunctioning, ‘acute intellectual obsolescence’, and ‘internal disarray’, we should appreciate that even the most ramshackle contraptions produce effects. If you think that the institutionalized structure of Geography expresses what Georges Perec (1999: 196) calls ‘perfectly astonishing miscellaneity’, consider this working classification of animals taken from French government documents:

(a) animals on which bets are laid, (b) animals the hunting of which is banned between 1 April and 15 September, (c) stranded whales, (d) animals whose entry within the national frontiers is subject to quarantine, (e) animals held in joint ownership, (f) stuffed animals, (g) etcetera [this etc is not at all surprising in itself; it is only where it comes in the list that makes it seem odd], (h) animals liable to transmit leprosy, (i) guide-dogs for the blind, (j) animals in receipt of significant legacies, (k) animals able to be transported in the cabin, (l) stray dogs without collars, (m) donkeys, (n) mares assumed to be with foal. (Perec, 1999: 197)

While Dear (p. 262) felt it necessary to cajole human geographers into taking on ‘a pivotal role in the social sciences and humanities’, many others have claimed that we have always been at the centre of things. The question that matters, then, is perhaps not so much whether we occupy a central or pivotal position within the academic division of labour, but how we occupy it and within what kind of apparatus. Re-reading the pages of ‘reconstructing human geography’ I must admit to being none the wiser about what we are slowly ceasing to be and what we are in the process of becoming. I am not convinced that Dear has identified either the archive that ‘separates us from ourselves’, the currency of ‘the Other with which we already coincide’, or the ‘lines of flight’ through which we will become Other. Perhaps this triple failure is why Dear’s paper has secured for itself the status of an enduring classic.8 As human geography continues to dissolve through practice, we desperately need to ‘untangle the lines of the recent past from the lines of the near future: the archive from the current, the part of history and the part of becoming, the part of analysis and the part of diagnosis’ (Deleuze, 2006: 346). We still do not know of what human geographers are capable.

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1. These scare quotes are not mine. They were sent to me by the editor of the journal and ostensibly belong to the 'classics revisited' series as a whole.

2. Like all good lists, this one contains errors.

3. Echoing the final endnote of Dear’s (1988: 274) paper – ‘one’s response to [the postmodern] challenge is a political decision as much as an intellectual one’ – I would prefer to borrow Fredric Jameson’s (1981) phrase and say that postmodernism has sunk into the discipline’s political unconscious.

4. Dear is fond of pivots. His ‘reconstruction’ of human geography attempts to identify yet another geographical pivot of history – on the plane of social theory rather than on the Earth’s surface.


6. I hesitate to say ‘the current state of human geography’ since we have reserved the word ‘current’ for that which takes flight from this sad state of affairs.

7. These are Dear’s examples. Needless to say, many of those geographers blighted by redundancy and marginality were keen to voice their displeasure.

8. Given that no one is scared of either postmodernism or structuration theory, I have taken the liberty of dispensing with the scare quotes.


Commentary 2
A visit to an old friend can be beset with problems. Not so this time: re-reading Michael Dear’s seminal paper that made ‘postmodernism’ a household name in geography almost 20 years ago, nostalgia finds a natural ally in a rekindled enthusiasm and gratitude. Admittedly, however, it has been some time since last I read the paper: it still finds its place on reading lists given out to students, but so much has happened since its year of publication that it has gradually acquired a taken-for-granted quality.

Not that this will surprise anyone. Like any truly relevant scholarship, ‘The postmodern challenge’ was written within and for its time, thus perhaps accepting the inevitable dating of its claims as a price to be paid for making an impact at the time of publication. Re-reading, we ought to remember, always also involves the hermeneutical labour of re-inventing the context in which a paper first appeared. If today some knowledge of philosophical undercurrents is almost de rigueur for any paper to be published in human geography, as recently as 20 years ago such broader manners of contextualizing insights were almost unheard of and certainly not called for. If anything, geographers wore the all but exclusive geographical nature of their knowledge visibly on their sleeves – with notable exceptions like Peter Gould, Yi-Fu Tuan, Robert Sack or Bob Dodgshon, to name just a few. In this respect, Dear’s paper paved a new route in a manner not dissimilar to the way that David Harvey’s work a decade earlier had opened up avenues towards the work of Karl Marx or other authors had allowed for the inclusion of social theory into the writings of geographers. Path-breakers all, and thus, perhaps by definition, writing in a manner that would age more openly than more topical claims to knowledge – which find a more obvious place in the genealogy of particular discourses.

For me, being an under- and postgraduate student throughout the 1980s, it was this latter quality, the opening up of geographical