

Social Geography: A Review

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Abstract: Social geography is the branch of human geography that is most closely related to social theory in general and sociology in particular, dealing with the relation of social phenomena and its spatial components. Though the term itself has a tradition of more than 100 years, there is no consensus on its explicit content. In 1968, Anne Buttimer noted that "[w]ith some notable exceptions, (...) social geography can be considered a field created and cultivated by a number of individual scholars rather than an academic tradition built up within particular schools". Since then, despite some calls for convergence centred on the structure and agency debate, its methodological, theoretical and topical diversity has spread even more, leading to numerous definitions of social geography and, therefore, contemporary scholars of the discipline identifying a great variety of different social geographies. However, as Benno Werlen remarked, these different perceptions are nothing else than different answers to the same two (sets of) questions, which refer to the spatial constitution of society on the one hand, and to the spatial expression of social processes on the other.

I. INTRODUCTION

The different conceptions of social geography have also been overlapping with other sub-fields of geography and, to a lesser extent, sociology. When the term emerged within the Anglo-American tradition during the 1960s, it was basically applied as a synonym for the search for patterns in the distribution of social groups, thus being closely connected to urban geography and urban sociology. In the 1970s, the focus of debate within American human geography lay on political economic processes (though there also was a considerable number of accounts for a phenomenological perspective on social geography), while in the 1990s, geographical thought was heavily influenced by the "cultural turn". Both times, as Neil Smith noted, these approaches "claimed authority over the 'social'". In the American tradition, the concept of cultural geography has a much more distinguished history than social geography, and encompasses research areas that would be conceptualized as "social" elsewhere. In contrast, within some continental European traditions, social geography was and still is considered an approach to human geography rather than a sub-discipline, or even as identical to human geography in general.

The term 'social geography' carries with it an inherent confusion. In the popular perception the distinction between social and cultural ge-ography is not very clear. The idea which has gained popularity with the geographers is that social geography is an analysis of social phe-nomena as expressed in space.

However, the term 'social phenomena' is in it nebulous and might be interpreted in a variety of ways keeping in view the specific context of the societies at different stages of social

evolution in the occidental and the oriental worlds. The term 'social phenomena' encompasses the whole framework of human in-teraction with environment, leading to the articulation of social space by diverse human groups in different ways.

The end-product of hu-man activity may be perceived in the spatial patterns manifest in the personality of regions; each pattern acquiring its form under the over-arching influence of social structure. Besides the patterns, the way the social phenomena express themselves in space may become a cause of concern as well. This has attracted scholarly attention, particularly since 1945 when all-embracing changes in the political and economic order of the world started casting their shadows on the global society.

II. SOCIAL STATISTICS AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

Two final manifestations of the social sciences in the 19th century are social statistics and social (or human) geography. At that time, neither achieved the notability and acceptance in colleges and universities that such fields as political science and economics did. Both, however, were as clearly visible by the latter part of the century as any of the other social sciences. And both were to exert a great deal of influence on the other social sciences by the beginning of the 20th century: social statistics on sociology and social psychology pre-eminently; social geography on political science, economics, history, and certain areas of anthropology, especially those areas dealing with the dispersion of races and the diffusion of cultural elements. In social statistics the key figure of the century was a Belgian, Adolphe Quetelet, who was the first, on any systematic basis, to call attention to the kinds of structured behaviour that could be observed and identified only through statistical means. It was Quetelet who brought into prominence the momentous concept of "the average man" and his behaviour. The two major figures in social or human geography in the century were Friedrich Ratzel in Germany and Paul Vidal de la Blache in France. Both broke completely with the crude environmentalism of earlier centuries, which had sought to show how topography and climate actually determine human behaviour, and they substituted the more subtle and sophisticated insights into the relationships of land, sea, and climate on the one hand and, on the other, the varied types of culture and human association that are to be found on earth.

In summary, by the end of the 19th century all the major social sciences had achieved a distinctiveness, an importance widely recognized, and were, especially in the cases of economics and political science, fully accepted as disciplines in the universities. Most important, they were generally

accepted as sciences in their own right rather than as minions of philosophy

III. TAXONOMY OF SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

The taxonomy of a discipline, while arising out of its logical system, subsumes within itself the specificities of its intellectual tradition, whereby words and terms acquire specific connotations and nuances of meaning through large-scale usage and social acceptance. But this process of crystallization of the classificatory scheme is greatly distorted if the same term tends to acquire different connotations or different shades of meaning tend to be expressed through the same term.

Such is unfortunately the case with that segment of geographical studies which is termed as Human or Anthro or Social or Cultural Geography. The term “Human Geography” has a vintage value; it emerged in an embryonic state as an element in the essential dichotomy of geography during the classical period itself and acquired more definitive connotation at the hands of the great French possibility.

The term “Anthropo-Geography”, on the other hand, arose within the rigid and inflexible conceptual framework of environmental determinism. The term “Social Geography” was perhaps introduced by Vallaux in 1908 through his *Geographic Sociale: La Mer* as a synonym for Human Geography and has since then remained ill-defined—its boundaries fluctuating at an alarming rate.

The term “Cultural Geography” is a gift from the new world, which, while contributing a new item in geographical glossaries, has unfortunately only added to the semantic confusion. A look at some of the standard definitions of these terms would clearly bring out the prevailing lack of clarity on these questions.

Monk house in his *A Dictionary of Geography* defines Human Geography as the “part of Geography dealing with man and human activities”. In the same volume, the learned scholar states later that Social Geography “is often used simply as the equivalent of Human Geography, or in the U.S.A. as ‘Cultural Geography’, but usually it implies studies of population, urban and rural settlements, and social activities as distinct from political and economic ones”.

Dudley Stamp in the *Longman’s Dictionary of Geography* defines Cultural Geography as “that which emphasizes human cultures and is commonly equated with human geography”.

It is quite clear that definitions like the above are of no help in demarcating the areas covered by these sub-disciplines of Geography. If there is so much of connotative similarity there is a strong case for discarding two of these terms so that geographers can at least understand each other.... Alternatively, two of these areas of academic work may be viewed as sub-sets of the third one.

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