



Taking the pulse of the dead: History and philosophy of geography, 2008–2009

Trevor J. Barnes

University of British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

The thread linking the history and philosophy of geography literature for 2008–2009 is the return of previously expired approaches, particularly quantification and Marxism. On the one hand, there has been a resurgence of quantitative techniques combined with a critical political sensibility, and, on the other, a renewed interest in Marxism but leavened by various strains of poststructuralism.

Keywords

archives, critical GISci, Foucault, Marxism, pragmatism, quantification

I Introduction

Never having been trained in any aspect of archival research, I often feel like a bull in a china shop as I riffle through boxes of correspondence and papers housed at special collections in university libraries and public archives. My use of the word ‘riffle’, of course, is an immediate giveaway about my bad habits. In May of this year at the magnificent American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, poring over the Edward Ackerman collection, I was gently chastised for being ‘too enthusiastic’ with the Xerox machine. And in July in the strangely cramped Dickensian space of the Rare Books and Special Collections Division at Princeton University’s Firestone Library (I felt like Bob Cratchit) going through the John Q. Stewart papers I was not-so-gently accused of creating too much ‘paper dust’. The torn sulphur-yellow sheets of paper on which Stewart wrote went back to the 1930s. Now held together with rusty paper clips, they were fraying, turning to powder on touch. The fine particle remains of

Stewart’s lecture notes accumulated as a thin layer of dust on my lap and on the sturdy writing table. Other patrons knew better. The man in front of me wore an apron, and the woman to my side white gloves.

Yes, I know. The physical manuscript is sacred. One should never riffle through carbon-copied, onion-skin paper letters, crinkled yellowing mimeographed Departmental memos, and fading, badly typed graduate student essays written 75 years ago. But that is what I wanted to do (and ashamedly sometimes did, when no one was looking): to go through the archives quickly, following the thread of the narrative, discarding the boring bits, the grandstanding, the brown nosing, the claustrophobic obligatory prose. I wanted to take, in Ann Laura Stoler’s (2009: Chapter 2) lovely phrase, the ‘pulse of the

Corresponding author:

Department of Geography, 1984 West Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada

Email: tbarnes@geog.ubc.ca

archive'. Of course, most of the archival material I read was written by people no longer in this world. I was taking the pulse of the dead. But even though there was no heartbeat, life throbbed on the page.

If there is a theme to this year's writings in the history and philosophy of geography (especially the philosophy), it is recognizing that what was judged dead, in fact, still has a pulse. Ideas, concepts, words, and phrases that one might have thought had passed beyond life to the other side – the quantitative revolution, the materialist dialectic, autocorrelation, the *Grundrisse* – are back, and vitally beating.

II 'Wherever you can, count'

Certainly, quantification is back, and reviewed by the self-described 'Legends of quantitative geography and Geographical Information Science' in a special 40th anniversary issue of *Geographical Analysis* (2008). That journal was inaugurated in 1969 partly to solidify the made-over Department of Geography at Ohio State that had gone quantitative under Ned Taaffe's chairmanship six years before, and partly to provide a formal outlet for quantitative work that formerly had appeared only within informal publications, most famously, in the MICMOG (Michigan Inter-University Community of Mathematical Geographers) series, and now reissued online.² Ohio State University Press published *Geographical Analysis* on the condition that MICMOG cease publication, with John Nystuen handing over its mailing list of 700 names and addresses.³

The essay reviews by the 'Legends' are clear, comprehensive, and adept, covering spatial and geospatial analysis (Berry *et al.*, 2008), behavioural geography (Golledge, 2008), migration (Clark, 2008), autocorrelation (Getis, 2008) and GISci (Goodchild, 2008). Sometimes they seemed too much like *déjà vu* all over again. And on occasion, in spite of flashes of bravado and triumphalism, they were unnecessarily

defensive in their dismissal of non-quantitative approaches. I am not clear why the 'Legends' are so touchy. The quantitative approach is part of the discipline's furniture, and, buttressed by GISci, it is not going to disappear any time soon (Barnes, 2010). Nonetheless, Robert Baker (2008: 216), in an otherwise persuasive introduction to the collection, still feels the need to call me one of the "'barbarians" at the frontier' for a commentary on quantitative methods that I wrote 15 years ago. Similarly, Berry *et al.* (2008: 229) begin their paper with a gratuitous slur of 'Marxism, deconstruction, and postmodernism' for 'deflect[ing] geography from the cusp of scientific respectability'. In the same vein, Richard Morrill (2008: 326) implies that those in human geography associated with poststructuralism are like those who believe in 'intelligent design'. More even-handed are personal retrospectives by Robert Stimpson (2008), Ron Johnston (2008), and Peter Haggett (2008a; 2008b). Haggett's two pieces are delightful. 'Delightful', I know, is not the kind of adjectival evaluation usually used in these progress reports, and, when it is, it is often as a back-handed compliment: pleasant but not serious. But Haggett is pleasant *and* serious. There are the agreeable and familiar Haggett writing tropes – self-deprecation, rye ironic asides, gentle ribbing of friends by anecdote – but they are intertwined with a set of forcefully articulated arguments: how all histories, including the history of quantitative geography, are 'fables' (Haggett, 2008a: 226), that we can never control the future course of ideas ('Nor should we' – Haggett, 2008a: 228), and that we should be suspicious of labels, including the label 'Legend' (Haggett, 2008b: 336).

Special issues of *The Professional Geographer* (Barnes, 2009; Ellis, 2009; Goetz *et al.*, 2009; Leszczynski, 2009a; Wyly, 2009; Zolnik, 2009) and *Environment and Planning A* (Bergmann *et al.*, 2009; Hamilton, 2009; Strauss, 2009) organized by Mei-Po Kwan and Tim Schwanen (2009a; 2009b) on critical quantitative geographies illustrate the possibilities of quantitative

geography once it is thought about differently than the presentations of many of the ‘Legends’ (and thereby perhaps fulfilling Haggett’s imperative about letting go). For Kwan and Schwanen (2009a: 284), those possibilities turn on using ‘quantitative geography ... [as] a powerful tool for fostering progressive social and political change’. That said, as several contributors as well as the editors recognize, the original turn to formal theory and numbers in geography during the 1950s was driven, at least for a few of its participants, by exactly a critical political sensibility. (Perhaps the best exemplar is the University of Washington ‘space cadet’ Bill Bunge; Heyman, 2007.)

The case for the power of numbers as a strategy against power is made especially well by Mark Ellis (‘I cannot imagine how human geography can be critical if it does not embrace ... numbers’ – Ellis, 2009: 308), and in Elvin Wyly’s (2009: 316) brilliantly seditious paper: ‘All statistics are social constructions, but when critical geographers abandon statistics, we give up the opportunity to shape and mobilize these constructions for progressive purposes.’ The larger point, contra some of the ‘Legends’, is that one can be a Marxist, postmodernist or poststructural critic and make use of mathematics and formal theory. There is no contradiction; indeed, the combination may well be a necessity, producing papers that meet even the exacting scientific standards of *Geographical Analysis*. Bergmann *et al.* (2009) have written one (although it is published in that other journal of spatial theory launched a year before the inauguration of *Geographical Analysis, Environment and Planning A*). Replete with an appendix containing 18 equations and five of the most brain-jarringly complex diagrams I have ever seen, their sources of inspiration are not Isaac Newton, August Lösch or George Zipf, but ‘such scholars as Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Bruno Latour, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’ (Bergmann *et al.*, 2009: 266).

A parallel literature, larger even than the one on numbers, exists on the critical engagement

within GISci. Here there seems less touchiness, a greater willingness to connect. This is apparent in Nadine Schuurman’s (2009a; 2009b) (on the critical side of GISci) interview with Michael Goodchild (one of the ‘Legends’). Goodchild even says at one point ‘Neil Smith was absolutely right’ (Schuurman, 2009b: 579). More of a stretch but still in the realm of the possible, Goodchild might say that Paul Kingsbury and John Paul Jones’s (2009) Dionysian interpretation of Google Earth is ‘absolutely right’ too. What they all recognize is the democratic potential of new mapping technologies that allow everyone to do their own cartographic representation and analysis, and, if necessary, to contest ‘official’ maps and their interpretation, redrawing and reinterpreting them if necessary. In that light, there is Kevin Ramsey’s (2008) applied GISci study using Chantel Mouffe’s notion of ‘agonism’ (see also Barnes and Sheppard, 2009); and for conspiracy lovers there are Chris Perkins and Martin Dodge’s (2009) spooky maps of the state’s (undemocratic) secret spaces. All this critical engagement does not mean love and harmony now infuse GISci. There are still disputes, but they seem to be among people working broadly on the same project (Crampton, 2009; Leszczynski, 2009b; 2009c), rather than between people aligned in opposition.

Finally, if there remains residual doubt about the possibility of being both politically critical and scientifically rigorous, read Alain Baidou, one of the more exotic incarnations of contemporary French social theory. Vital to his ‘thinking the event’ is calculability, used not metaphorically but as Zermelo–Fraenkel set theory. The former ‘old hand’ of British quantitative geography, Keith Bassett (2008), provides a scrupulously clear account. Predictably murkier is Marcus Doel’s (2009), but that might be deliberate, given his earlier problems with the number one (Doel, 2001) (and likely confirming the suspicions of some of ‘the Legends’). Murkiest of all is Juliet MacCannell’s (2009) Lacanian interpretation (that definitely will confirm them).

III Lost and found in the post

In narratives of the recent history of human geography what comes after the quantitative revolution is Marxism. 'The quantitative revolution has run its course and diminishing marginal returns are apparently setting in', said David Harvey (1972: 6). Harvey's alternative, based on his brilliant geographical exegesis of Marx's writings, later came to dominate parts of the discipline. But it too was toppled, charged with such sins as essentialism, economism, phallogentrism, logocentrism, and Eurocentrism by one or more post-prefixed theory that emerged during the 1990s.

While Marx for a while appeared to be lost in the post, just maybe he has been refound in a series of ambitious and philosophically recondite papers written over the last year often by a younger generation who practise exegetical readings not only of Marx and Hegel, but also of Derrida, Spivak, Deleuze, Guattari and others (for a counter view, see M. Jones, 2008). These readings can be found especially in three special journal issues: one edited by Deborah Dixon and John Paul Jones III on dialectics in *Environment and Planning A* (Collinge, 2008; Dixon and Jones, 2008; Doel, 2008; Elden, 2008; Gidwani, 2008a; Hooper, 2008; Ruddick, 2008; Secor, 2008; Sheppard, 2008); one edited by Michael Ekers, Alex Loftus and Geoff Mann on Gramsci in *Geoforum* (Ekers *et al.*, 2009; Ekers, 2009; Loftus, 2009; Mann, 2009a; Wainwright and Mercer, 2009); and one edited by Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright on Marx's *Grundrisse* in *Antipode* (Gidwani, 2008b; Mann, 2008; Mann and Wainwright, 2008; Sayre, 2008; Wainwright, 2008).

The quality of scholarship of some of the papers is extraordinarily high, the prose trenchant, limpid, and exacting. Marx may be another dead white European male, but when read geographically through various poststructural, postcolonial, and post-Marxist theorists he comes alive and sings. 'The dead man is not that dead' as Derrida said (quoted in Mann,

2009b: 371). The individual pieces are not quite all there yet, nor are their exact alignment and configuration, but it feels as if we are on the verge of something new and possibly momentous. It is perhaps invidious to pick out particular contributors, but Vinay Gidwani's (2008a; 2008b) two papers about Marx, Hegel, Fanon and Spivak perfectly exemplify both the achievements and the prospects (see also Gidwani's, 2008c, magnificent book). His achievements include writing that crackles and illuminates, concrete historical scholarship mixed with testing abstract philosophical analysis, plurality of intellectual sources, and close textual reading proceeding word by word (sometimes translated word by translated word). The prospect is new ways to write geography and philosophy, and possibly new ways to write the history and philosophy of geography too. That would be a prospect to relish.

While Marx may have been refound, Foucault seems to have been, if not misplaced, then compared to previous years at least left on the shelf. This is despite the fact that Foucault was ranked number one on the top 20 list of the most cited authors in the humanities and social sciences in 2007 (*Times Higher Education* 26 March, 2009⁴). David Harvey was the only geographer to make it to the top 20. Indeed, he was one of the few on the list still alive and writing, the latest being his book on cosmopolitanism (Harvey, 2009). Three papers were explicitly on Foucault (Ekers and Loftus, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Saldanha, 2008), although there were others linking him to other writers, especially Agamben (Belcher *et al.*, 2008; Coleman and Grove, 2009). I learned most from Saldanha's (2008) transparent essay on heterotopia and structuralism. Foucault abandoned heterotopia, one of his most spatially infused notions, almost as soon as he conceived it. But it took on a second life in the Anglophone literature once Foucault died (in geography, promoted especially by Soja, 1996). The idea was reintroduced through the English translation of his essay, 'Of other

spaces', originally just notes for a wireless broadcast, and later turned into a paper, although one Foucault never sought to publish (Foucault, 1986 [1984]). Saldanha's (2008) argument is that Foucault may have been a reluctant publisher because he recognized that heterotopia comes with structuralist baggage, manifest spatially as a presumption of fixed boundaries. Yet, for Foucault, 'history never simply happens to bounded places' (Saldanha, 2008: 2093).

IV 'I write for users, not readers'⁵

You might think that the section title comes from a pragmatist philosopher, but it is from Foucault. Richard Rorty (1991), who really was a pragmatist philosopher, argued that Foucault, like Msr Jourdan who spoke prose without knowing it, practised pragmatism without knowing it. Rorty's claim about the link between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American pragmatism and continental European philosophy significantly contributed to bringing the former back from the philosophical Netherworld where it was consigned in the 1950s. In a special 2008 issue of *Geoforum*, there is a similar attempt to revive pragmatism by geographers, although admittedly it only ever enjoyed at best a sporadic and marginal disciplinary existence (Allen, 2008; Barnes, 2008; Bridges, 2008; Coaffee and Headlam, 2008; Cutchin, 2008; Hepple, 2008; O. Jones, 2008; Wood and Smith, 2008).

At the heart of pragmatism is the belief that ideas are like knives and forks, implements to accomplish particular tasks, and not transcendent truths. This is what makes pragmatism pragmatism. It is a philosophy of practical achievement. Ideas are labelled true when they enable us to get things done. It celebrates users over readers. If there is a problem with the *Geoforum* collection it is that pragmatism itself is not *used* often enough, but instead is put on a pedestal (in the interests of disclosure, my paper is a

principal offender – Barnes, 2008). Fortunately, there are exceptions. Gary Bridges (2008) draws on Jane Addam's social experiments at Hull House, Michel de Certeau's walks on the boulevards of Paris, and Jane Jacob's daily witness of the 'intricate ballet' of Manhattan's West Village, to show how pragmatist ideals might be mobilized to create vibrant, decent urban communities that hum with life. And John Allen (2008), drawing on a variety of concrete examples of corporate and NGO global strategies, develops and works through – *uses* – a pragmatist conception of power that stresses enablement rather than repression, and the overwhelming impress of contingency on the human lot (Charles Peirce's 'everything that can happen by chance, sometime or other will happen by chance' – Peirce, 1982: 544). For Allen (2008: 1620) we live lives of geographical 'throwntogetherness', using power if not always to get what we want then to get what we need.

Around the same time that the founding Boston Brahmin members of the 'metaphysical club' convened to discuss what would become pragmatism (Menand, 2001), the late nineteenth-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde was working out his theory of the chimerical character of the social. Moreover, just as pragmatism's death was later greatly exaggerated, according to some recent poststructuralists so was the work of Tarde (Vargas *et al.*, 2008). In fact, the return of the dead is becoming an increasingly crowded field. Another 'second coming', suggest Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (2009: 8, 4), is the German 'left-Nietzschean' Peter Sloterdijk to whom a special issue of *Society and Space* is devoted (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 29, issue 1, 2009). But my favourite reincarnation is 'phase space'. Once part of Walter Isard's regional science, social physics vision of the discipline, phase space is given defibrillation by Martin Jones (2009), energetically jolting it back into the life of contemporary human geography. Stand clear.

V 'The past is never dead. It's not even past'⁶

But don't stand too far away. Abstract ideas, even phase space, remain closely tethered to people, past and present. A keen sense of human ties that bind is conveyed in Hugh Clout's (2009) richly detailed and Herculean study of the 100 French regional monographs published between 1905 and 1966 that stem from the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache and his cascading generations of students. 560 printed pages was the average length of each regional monograph (implying also that Clout read 56,000 pages of text). The doctoral students who wrote them were not done until they were on average 33 years old. Even then a wrong word from their patron supervisor (although in many cases supervisor inflates the contribution), and it would be the *lycée* for them.

Berkeley's Carl Sauer was a chip off the same patron-model block (albeit the German 'doctor-father' version – tellingly his students called him 'the Old Man'). His lesser-known writings, as well as a set of interpretative essays by former students and students of his students are found in Denevan and Mathewson's (2009) useful collection. Sauer wrote stridently against environmental determinism, emphasizing instead the role of culture. That was not the case for a contemporary of his, another patron, the peripatetic Australian and arch environmental determinist Griffith Taylor. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford (2008) provide a well written and illustrated biography. Renowned for the quantity if not the quality of his publications, even his friend Isaiah Bowman said in a recommendation letter that Taylor possessed an 'outer fringe of lunacy' (Strange and Bashford, 2008: 210). Miraculously, he still got the job. In 1935 Taylor was made the founding Head of Canada's first university geography department at the University of Toronto (Strange and Bashford, 2008: 206–13; Warkentin, 2008).

Taylor studied arctic environments, even accompanying Captain Scott on his ill-fated

1911–12 race to the South Pole (although Taylor was sane enough to avoid being at the final camp). Forty-five years later, the South Pole became one of the sites at which there was a different kind of race, one involving the two superpowers. The ostensible purpose of the International Geophysical Year (IGY, 1957–58) was scientific exchange and cooperation, but, as a special issue of the *Journal of Historical Geography* makes clear, the real story was cold-war rivalry (Collis and Dodds, 2008; Glasberg, 2008; Howkins, 2008; Naylor *et al.*, 2008; Powell, 2008). The IGY was established as 'a "scientific Olympics of sorts", involving 60,000 scientists' from 67 countries (Collis and Dodds, 2008: 555). The selection of the objects of IGY inquiry and their interpretation – outer space, the ocean floor, the intertropical convergence zone, Antarctica – were deeply coloured by geopolitical military concerns. Good science emerged, but not from disinterested, objective inquiry. The tomes of analytical philosophy devoted to the virtues of scientific objectivity that piled up during the 1950s could have hardly been more wrong. Science was sodden in politics. As Naylor *et al.* (2008: 575) write about research carried out on Antarctica's ice sheet, 'US IGY seismic traverses should be understood not only as significant contributions to Antarctic glaciology and geophysics but ... as events ... embedded within and influenced by geopolitical factors, military developments and geo-strategic advancement'. Behind the science, 'lurked gut-felt fears that the Russians would pre-empt the polar continent if the "Free World" did not act first', as one senior US scientist put it (quoted in Naylor *et al.*, 2008: 581).

Set against these various male worlds are Avril Maddrell's (2009) 'complex locations' of women geographers. Assiduously researched and elegantly written, Maddrell's book is partly biography, partly social history, partly epistemology, and partly political manifesto. For Maddrell (2009: 1), studying the discipline's past is one means to change its future. This is another

way in which ‘the past is never dead’. With terrific archaeological instincts, she ‘unearths’ ‘shards’ of historical evidence allowing her to uncover the often hitherto buried lives of UK women geographers, educators and travellers between 1850 and 1970, bringing into daylight the harsh outlines of a historically gendered discipline and its masculine production of knowledge (Maddrell, 2009: xi).

VI Conclusion

Maddrell’s book is in many ways a model of the possibilities of the history and philosophy of geography. It makes taking the pulse of the dead (as well as in Maddrell’s case those who are still alive) winning, scholarly, intellectually satisfying, and politically charged. Going into the archives is enlivening, not deadening; bracing, not soporific. If there is any doubt, read Adrian Bailey, Catherine Brace and David Harvey’s (2009) adventures in Truro’s Cornwall Records Office and Redruth’s Cornish Studies Library. At first blush, these are not places that you would think would make the heart beat faster (especially once you have seen the photos; Bailey *et al.*, 2009: 261). The topic of Methodism and temperance in nineteenth-century west Cornwall would also seem unlikely to generate a mounting of the barricades. But the hermeneutic conversations among the three about archive research and their topic end up raising fascinating questions about life and death, and even the history and philosophy of geography.

‘Thou art dust and unto dust you shall return’, says *The Book of Common Prayer*. This was the fate of John Q. Stewart’s lecture notes, and eventually him – but, in between, they and he were filled with life. Let there be life in the history and philosophy of geography.

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Notes

1. Francis Galton, quoted in Newman (1956: 1169).
2. <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/58252> (last accessed 16 September 2009).
3. Interview with the author, Ann Arbor, Michigan, November 1977.
4. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=405925&encCode=184949851BC54459875JTBS737226611> (last accessed 20 September 2009).
5. Foucault (1994 [1974]: 523–24).
6. William Faulkner, act I, scene II, *Requiem for a nun*, 1951.

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