

Antipode

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Intervention Symposium

Did We Accomplish the Revolution in Geographic Thought?

Revolution and Permanent Counterrevolution in Geographic Thought

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A counter-revolutionary theory is one which is deliberately proposed to deal with a revolutionary theory in such a manner that the threatened social changes which the general acceptance of the revolutionary theory would generate are, either by cooptation or subversion, prevented from being realized. (Harvey 1973: 125)

Minds which thirst for a tidy platonism very soon become impatient with actual history. (Thompson 1978: 257)

Imagine a piece of sandstone, roughly triangular shape, 18 or so inches wide at its base and about two feet tall. In the old days, before the revolution in geographical thought, geographers might have been interested in it only to the degree it might help typify a physiographic province, or, *in situ*, how it might provide evidence for one or another Davisian moment of denudation or deposition. Now, they might seek to understand not just the local, but the global process that led to its formation—the local, regional, continental, and global processes of tectonic movement and climate change, of equilibrium and catastrophe, of deep time and sudden disruption. They might pick away at the grains, examining size, chemical composition, orientation and more. They

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might examine it both in the lab and in relation to the landscape around it, all in an effort not only to understand *it*, but to understand the physical processes and relations across space that formed it over time, all the better to understand those processes and relations, and the time- and space-scales at which they operate (and then to generalize). Who knows? The point is that as fairly static pre-war Davisian geomorphology and Köppenian climate classification gave way to postwar, dynamic, process geomorphology and climate change studies, as geography went through its revolution, the field was radically transformed, geography became—and continues to be—central to and vital for the larger project of understanding global environmental change in all its complexity. Physical things are processural and relational. They are historical, in that they come to be as they are over time through a complex concatenation of forces. As such, things can be studied to deduce the processes and relations—the histories and geographies—that make them what they *are*. The rock has internalized those processes and relations. This much is now obvious. And this is, now, standard operating procedure among physical geographers (physical geography being a deeply *historic* business), the result, I think, of a quite important revolution in geographic thought.

But that piece of sandstone you are imagining is not *in situ* nor is it in the lab. Rather, it leans against a post on my patio in Syracuse, New York (see Figure 1). My house is nestled among the drumlins just south of glacial Lake Iroquois and there's no native sandstone anywhere near (it's all shales and occasional limestones). What sandstones there are in the region look nothing like this chunk of rock. It's not an erratic. It's decorative. If you took your lead from the physical geographers and wanted to understand the rock as a window onto the processes that made it, then you would start by asking: what's that rock doing there? What set of processes and relations—what histories (because human geography is a deeply *historic* business)—brought it to be there? The search for answers might take you to property law because if you were to interview the rock's owner (me!), you would learn that I got the rock—took ownership of it—when I bought a condominium (and its appurtenances) in Boulder, Colorado, and the previous owners had left the rock (an appurtenance) behind. Or it might take you to other aspects of the law

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concerning the removal of natural artefacts from natural areas. It might take you to an understanding of the at least continental scale of academic labor markets and the difficulties of finding dual academic careers at the same institution or in the same city (since these were central to why I left Boulder for Syracuse). Or it might otherwise take you to an analysis of memory and nostalgia in relation to place and how we often seek out talismanic reminders of places important to us, for surely this was crucial to why I brought the rock with me. Maybe it will turn you toward an examination of landscape aesthetics or the geography of desire, each determined, of course, by histories of art and education.



Figure 1

Nearly 50 years of revolutionary developments in geography have given us good ideas of how to do this kind of work, and, of course, work that is far more consequential: work that digs deeply into the spatial structuring and sedimented histories (Massey 1984) of labor processes and economic exploitation, of housing markets, gentrification, and displacement, of capital circulation and economic restructuring, of memory, geopolitics, and identity, of race and racism, gender and patriarchy, sexuality and heterosexism. The very forces shaping that rock's *social*

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being—property, law, labor markets, and spatial memory or identity (and their manifest contradictions)—are all now central sites of geographical investigation, and all are ineluctably relational, their processes ineluctably historical. The revolution in geographic thought has been *at base* a basic revolution in how we understand our objects of analysis: objects are, ineluctably, relational and historical (not platonic); they *come* to be. This is true whether the object is a rock, a landscape, a labor market, or a political economy.

It would take you to dialectical thinking because, though not always clearly articulated in this way, the revolution in geographic thought, has been powered by dialectical thinking (Ollman 1992). Solid geographies, fixed spaces, objects, are (properly) understood to be condensations of relations and histories that have to be understood both as ongoing, fluctuating social process *and* reifications of those processes. What matters are the *internal relations* that shape structures. This is an incredibly powerful way of knowing and one that, as Ollman (1992) makes clear, sets revolutionary thinking apart from status quo thinking, which takes objects, structures, and things as pre-given and seeks to understand the relations *between* them. A revolution in geographic thought has indeed been accomplished.

But now, new, new cultural and post, post-phenomenological geographers, to say nothing of all those geographers who have fallen into the “assemblage” trap (all of whom would be much better termed new- or neo-platonists) are having none of it. Indeed:

Post-phenomenology and its concern with objects allows us to move beyond curiosity or provocation to think the aesthetic causalities of how objects relate to one another and explore what non-human things are and what they do in ways that attend to these things as objects, *rather than* relations or processes. (Ash and Simpson 2016: 63, emphasis added)

Let me put my critique in as sympathetic way as I possibly can: What a load of bollocks. Here is a keen example of what E.P. Thompson (1978) long ago diagnosed as *naïve* materialism lurking

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within some strains of radical thought, a materialism merely of *things*. For Ash and Simpson, and presumably for post-phenomenologists and “new materialists” in general, that piece of sandstone is, well, a piece of sandstone. Full stop. There is nothing else to say about it other than it leans *against* one object—a post—stands near another—a hosta—and sometimes gets rained or snowed upon: “The aesthetic causalities of how objects relate to one another”! The sandstone relates to other objects! It is near to them! To use a totally defeatist slogan that seems to encapsulate all that post-phenomenology has to say about anything in the world: it is what it is.¹

This is a completely counter-revolutionary theory that can have no other purpose than to “deal with...revolutionary theory”—with the revolution in geographic thought. Consider what “post-phenomenology” wants to be “post” to. Phenomenology along with other philosophical traditions grouped together as “humanism” entered geography as part of an explicitly political project, one aimed at countering the alienation of everyday life in the modern world. Humanism in geography was not only part of a wrenching transformation—the struggle for relevance—within geography as the quantitative revolution devolved (in human geography) into a technocraticism geared mostly towards upholding the status quo and making it more efficient. It was also part of a larger countercultural movement in society seeking alternatives to modern capitalisms’ relentless production of “organizational man”, “one dimensional man”, and the “lonely crowd”. While much of humanism in geography may have been hostile to the simultaneous Marxian revolution in the field, it nonetheless shared with Marxism—and anarchism—a guiding goal of not just understanding the world, but changing it, such that the necessary alienation of modern life would no longer be necessary. Working from the lifeworld of the individual and pushing outward to understand how that lifeworld was structured—how the very possibility of “dwelling”, for example, was constantly thwarted but could nonetheless be understood and promoted—phenomenology sought to get under and inside the “taken-for-granted” so as to better expose how it could be made, precisely, more humane. This was and remains a vital political goal, even

¹ A slogan a step below even that other totally defeatist and anti-intellectual slogan popular a few years back: “shit happens”.

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if it was one that (in my view) was scuppered on an untenable philosophical individualism and failure, in its development, to take historical process serious enough.

It was, thus, “not materialist enough”, as Raymond Williams (1977: 92) argued was also the case for various forms of “structural” Marxism regnant at the time. In both cases, this was due in good part to an underdeveloped theory of *mediation*, which in the years since has been nicely addressed in geography by political ecologists’ insistence that we more fully theorize the *metabolic relationship* between society and nature, a relationship significantly shaped and regulated by capital and its phenomenal form, money, as well as by social history’s insistence on *experience* as the mediating, driving *negotiation* of structure and (collective as well as individual) agency. “Mediation” (as metabolism and as experience) is, especially, a historical concept. Neither is explicable without simultaneously seeking to understand *how*—to use a fine definition of history—one damn thing has led to another. Any damn thing internalizes, even if in opposition, what has come before. All materialism must be *historical* materialism. Otherwise it simply cannot contribute to the revolutionary (that is “over-turning”) promise of even radical theories (like early phenomenology in geography) that may not appear revolutionary, but are. All it can do, through its “tidy platonism”, is divert attention so as to subvert meaning and action. Post-phenomenology, with its dismissals of internal relations and history, with its refusal to confront, e.g. alienation (to say nothing of exploitation, oppression, or even power), and with its assumption of the pure immanence of things, is not just wrong-headed, it is actively counter-revolutionary; it’s only purpose, seemingly, is to make geography every bit as irrelevant as it once was.

I am going too easy on the new, naive materialist (of which the post-phenomenologists are merely the latest cell). For it is not just the revolution in geographic thought they seek to turn back, but the scientific revolution itself. They’ve been known to wonder, for example, “how air *might* be made sense of as elemental” (Adey 2015: 54, emphasis added). A great question—for 1770 (or maybe 1840, if it’s the trace elements you’re interested in). Whole fields of inquiry have since developed. But never mind. The question before geographers—or what Peter Adey

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calls “aerographers”—is how “air” can be understood “through chemical-alchemical notions of affinity and a political-mythical philosophical elementalism” (2015: 54). Adey’s (2015: 60) obsessive use of the passive voice makes his meaning opaque—it’s rarely clear when he is defending or reputing a way of knowing—but by “affinities” he seems to approve when he says “affinity” is what we need to understand when we seek to understand the atmosphere, and “affinity is usually told as an alchemical attraction outside the rationalities of the chemical revolution”. Indeed, according to Adey (2015: 60) we need to “depart” modern chemistry if we really want to understand the air as elemental—“remaining true to...[an] earlier spirit” of alchemy. “Political-mythical elementalism” seems to be a state in which “the monstrous and the elemental...go hand in hand” (Adey 2015: 69). Adey (2015: 71) worries that his “elemental geography of the air might appear to be something of a step backwards”. He is right to worry.

There is simply no doubt that the “revolution in geographic thought” has been accomplished—over and over again. But the counterrevolutions have been swift and they have been strong. Some geographers have been quite active in pushing geography backwards—and not just a step—and this is exceedingly ironic since the main lever for doing so has been an actively anti-historical materialism. There is *no* cause-and-effect in the collaborationist new materialist geography running roughshod over much human geography. Immanence is all there *is*: any thing just *is* and all we can do is stare in wonder at a world that *is* and simply *will be*. If there is causality to be found, it exists only in the realm of the magical and alchemical, the inexplicable and non-rational.

It is tempting to think of this collaborationism as just another “peculiarity of the English [geographers]” who have turned to platonism as an easy way to negotiate the speed up of academic life and the hegemony of an audit culture that actively militates against actual research (and *historical* work takes *time*), but of course it is broader than that. Impatience with actual history is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it is now rife across geography pushing geography right to the edge of self-parody, or maybe over it (what if we thought of the air as elemental!). But make no mistake, the new materialism including the post-phenomenological—

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where things are things, history is ignored, immanence is everything, and hundreds of years of hard-won knowledge are thrown away in a flourish of (aggressively passive-voiced) rhetoric—is deeply political: it promotes a politics of safe anti-politics. It is counter-revolutionary in Kuhnian scientific terms in the first instance, and therefore in political terms in the second. The revolution in geographical thought has been accomplished. And it is—as always—being undone. That rock on my patio is now either just a rock or it’s an alchemical wonderment. It has no history; it has no being.

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