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Humanistic Geography: Can scientific endeavour alone capture all of the complexities of the human condition?

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Science is adequate in describing the phenomena that we experience on a daily basis, however it fails to adequately capture or even understand the human agent in all its perceptions, illogicality, emotions and feelings. Humanistic geography is a strand of human Geography that endeavours to disclose the complexity and ambiguity of human interactions with, and perceptions of, space and place.

"Scientific approaches to the study of man tend to minimize the role of human awareness and knowledge. Humanistic geography, by contrast, specifically tries to understand how geographical activities and phenomena reveal the quality of human awareness."[1] By the end of the 1960s objections surfaced regarding the usefulness of scientific methods within human geography.[2] Consequently, the quantitative revolution and spatial science waned due to critique by humanistic geographers such a Tuan, Ley, Buttimer, Relph and Entrikin, who claimed that a logical positivism was "overly objective, narrow, mechanistic and deterministic"[3] to gain a sophisticated understanding

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[1] Y. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography' (1976) 66 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 267.
[2] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[3] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992), 146.

of human life. Such a struggle to legitimise knowledge within geography has centred on the science-beyond-science binary, with humanistic geographers recognising the importance of human emotions, values and beliefs in altering how people perceive and act in the world. Generally, humanistic perspectives are grounded on certain philosophies including existentialism, phenomenology, idealism, pragmatism or realism, which attempt to provide alternative methodologies than logical positivism.[4] Furthermore, humanistic and scientific geographers hold differing ontological and epistemological notions about 'reality', with humanists suggesting that reality is a human construct; essentially an imagined/internal conception, whereas scientists believe that reality is tangible, and able to be studied rationally and objectively.[5] This article will critically assess both scientific and humanistic ideologies in geography, suggesting that alongside scientific inquiry, human emotions, values and beliefs are, too, crucially important to human geography.

Firstly, it is important to assess the continuous struggle within geography, between idiographic/descriptive and nomothetic/scientific research methods, for example the chorography of Strabo versus the 'proper' geography of Ptolemy. Strabo's geographies were essentially vast, sprawling, anecdotal accounts of 'regional geographies' across the globe, whereas Ptolemy is regarded for his sophisticated, spatial scientific approach to geography remaining heavily influenced by his astronomy and mathematics background. "Geography according to Hartshorne is essentially idiographic. Whenever laws are discovered or applied one is no longer in the area of geography. All it contributes is facts."[6] The belief that geography should become more scientific, in methodology, theory, and practice emerged during the quantitative revolution, when many geographers wished to heighten the

[4] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[5] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992).
[6] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991), 10.

reputation of geography within academic circles by aligning the discipline with the natural sciences. Abler et al. suggest that science has its foundations within the empirical world, answering the 'how' questions about life, in turn producing no variations of science/geography.[7] However, logical positivism alone cannot successfully explain the nuances, complexities, ambivalence and ambiguity of the human experience; phenomena which humanists so celebrate.[8] Mathematic, geometric and scientific methods of research within logical positivism cause 'scientific geographers' to leave out important social, political, emotional and economic aspects of life; therefore failing to consider other crucial geographical aspects of the human experience.[9] Spatial scientists' conquest to utilize scientific methods/theories, arguably, failed to explore serious or useful matters relating to the human experience. Instead, they became concerned with smaller micro-geographies, for example, optimum location for supermarkets, which in hindsight can be regarded as trivial, revealing very little about the overall human experience.[10]

Reaction to the shortcomings of logical positivism and spatial science marked the emergence of 'behavioural geography' from the mid-1960s, which stepped away from science by giving more recognition to human agency in the understanding of spatial behaviour.[11] Similar to spatial science, behavioural geography, sought to uncover overarching laws and patterns of human behaviour. By scrutinising the cognitive aspects of the human being, particularly perception, the geographer attempted to uncover how people react to the places and

[7] R. Abler et al., *Spatial Organisation: The Geographer's View of the World* (London, 1972).
[8] S. Daniels 'Arguments for a Humanistic Geography' (1985) in T. Barnes & D. Gregory (eds.), *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Enquiry* (London, 1997), 364-375.
[9] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[10] N. Castree et al., *Questioning Geography* (Oxford, 2005).
[11] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992).

spaces around them.[12] Such geography is exemplified in the development of 'mental mapping', which resulted due to a concern for the measurement of these human spatial perceptions, and to gain an understanding of resultant human actions.[13] However, lack of accepted mental map analysis techniques, and the assumption that human spatial behaviour could be generalised under nomothetic approaches has led to strong criticism of such an approach.[14] Circumventing the many weaknesses of behavioural geography for a moment can reveal its significant impact on future generations of human geographical thought, as it "helped demolish the myth of the economic man, and led geographers to a more realistic search for factors influencing environmental decision making"[15]; eventually leading to more sophisticated forms of humanistic geography.

Development of a humanistic geography heavily critiqued scientific inquiry, although many influential figures, such a Tuan, did not totally disregard its usefulness, but justly highlighted its inadequacies and shortcomings in relation to human geography. "The humanist today does not deny scientific perspectives on man; he just builds upon them."[16] Humanistic geographers appreciate the application of scientific methods, practices, and theories to phenomena within the material world, such as hydrology, plate tectonics, and climatology. Nevertheless, humanists highlight science's limited applicability in understanding all aspects of humanity, such as emotions, creativity, beliefs, and values. "Humanistic geography took the view that the aim of research should be to understand the diverse thoughts, values and feelings of capable human actors rather than try to seek general laws, models or theories to explain (let alone predict) their

[12] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[13] P. Gould & R. White, *Mental Maps* (London, 1974).
[14] R.J. Johnston & J.D. Sidaway *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography since 1945* 6th edn., (London, 2004).
[15] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992), 143.
[16] Y. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography' (1976) 66 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 267.

behaviour."[17] Humanistic geography, therefore, stepped further away from logical positivism than behavioural geography, considering human emotions, values and beliefs to be of utmost importance to provide a mature geographical understanding of the world. In doing so emerged the (re)assertion of the importance of the human agent, aiming to recentralise the human as the primary concern within human geography; echoing the descriptive, in depth approaches of early regional geographers. Daniels suggests that, within a humanistic perspective, the ambiguity and allusiveness of the human experience should be celebrated, as human feelings are beyond rational scrutiny, but contribute highly to individual human spatial choices, actions and behaviours.[18] Cloke et al. importantly assert that people are more that just numbers, dots and flows; that is to say unthinking 'automata' who conform to general patterns of behaviour, and overarching laws proposed by science.[19] In contrast to science, humanism takes seriously the 'internal worlds' of humans; cognition, perception and representation, utilising such phenomena to acquire a more accurate, albeit abstract, understandings of humanity.

Existing within humanistic geography is a focus on how issues of emotion, belief and value affect individuals' views on 'space', 'place', and 'sense of place'. Processes involved within the internal worlds of the human agent, of how spaces are transformed to become 'places', are of particular interest to the humanistic geographer.[20] Although not inherently scientific, issues of emotional attachment to space/place, and the role of symbols, icons, emblems and concepts in the formation of a 'sense of place', uncover much about the human experience; hence they cannot be regarded as ambiguous

[17] N. Castree et al., *Questioning Geography* (Oxford, 2005), 72.
[18] S. Daniels 'Arguments for a Humanistic Geography' (1985) in T. Barnes & D. Gregory (eds.), *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Enquiry* (London, 1997), 364-375.
[19] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[20] Y. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography' (1976) 66 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

distractions.[21] David Ley in the 1970s, for example, embarked upon in-depth analysis of various social groupings to unravel their 'sense of place'; their 'turfs', their graffiti etc.[22] In addition, relationships to space prove more important to human geography than scientific approaches, which divulge little about the human experience, such as geometry, land use planning and geology. Views on relationship with place are often regarded as anti-theoretical, purporting that geography is not wholly about regions, environments and space, but rather about 'place'. The claim, then, is that human geographical inquiry should concern itself with how the world perceived to be within internal worlds, not how it actually is within the tangible world.[23]

In addition to the critical assessment of logical positivism, one must note that scientists' apparent separation of 'self' (personal geographies, preconceptions, prejudices, values, emotions and past experiences) from their research is impossible. No individual can be truly objective due to the subjectivity of human nature, an aspect so inherently linked with how people function within, contend with and understand the world around them. Humanistic geographers recognise that the humanity of the researcher is equally important to that of their subject, in turn acknowledging that no human being can be truly objective, as their internal worlds of cognition, perception and representation simply cannot be turned on and off.[24] Philosophical foundations underpinning humanistic geography, such as phenomenology and existentialism, reject such "assumptions of objectivity, which enabled logical positivists to ignore the preconceptions and subjectivity upon which their laws and models

[21] S. Daniels 'Arguments for a Humanistic Geography' (1985) in T. Barnes & D. Gregory (eds.), *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Enquiry* (London, 1997), 364-375.
[22] D. Ley, 'The Black Inner City as Frontier Outpost: Images and Behavior of a Philadelphia Neighborhood' (1974) *Association of American Geographers Monograph Series No. 7*, 282.
[23] N. Castree et al., *Questioning Geography* (Oxford, 2005).
[24] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).

were based."[25] Phenomenology is the "understanding of essence"[26], an approach which attempts to gain an original understanding of the world by suspending the normal conventions of academic thought. It offers an alternative methodology to the hypothesis testing and theory building of logical positivism, recognising that unscientific methods provide a useful tool in conducting serious geographical/scientific research. Additionally, existentialism is another important philosophical stance within humanistic geography, which, similar to phenomenology, critiques nomothetic approaches in geography. As previously mentioned existential geography emphasises human individuals as free agents who interpret and put meaning on the spaces and environments surrounding them, resulting in the formation of 'place.'[27] In order to gain a more enlightened appreciation of humanity within human geography one must recognise the importance, especially in an increasingly interconnected world, of recognising the motives behind the creation of 'place'.

It is evident that the human experience was over simplified by logical positivism and scientific approaches to geography, and the recognition for human values, emotions, prejudices, beliefs and the like is necessary to attain a fuller, more effective human geography. The promotion of humans as living, acting, creative, thinking and capable beings is integral to the humanistic critique of a geography solely based of science and quantification.[28] It is important to note that humanistic approaches are not without their flaws too, as they can, and often do give the human agent too much credit in the ability to consciously choose ones personal geographies. Ideas of the preconscious and subconscious realms of the human mind problematize humanistic epistemologies.[29] Political, social, economic and environmental determinism mechanisms may also affect

[25] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992), 147.
[26] T. Unwin, *The Place of Geography* (London, 1992), 146.
[27] P. Cloke et al., *Approaching Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates* (London, 1991).
[28] R.J. Johnston & J.D. Sidaway, *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography since 1945* 6th edn., (London, 2004).
[29] C. Philo, *Geographical Thought Course* (Glasgow, 2010).

individuals, in turn constricting, restricting and channelling actions and spatial behaviour. However, humanistic geography makes use of non-scientific ontologies and epistemologies to provide a more sophisticated understanding of human life. Essentially the approach calls for geography to be something more than the formulation of spatial laws and patterns, something equally as 'serious' as scientific inquiry, but providing more a useful analysis of human individuals. Tuan illustrates this when he states: "Humanistic geography contributes to science by drawing attention to facts hitherto beyond the scientific purview."[30]

[30] Y. Tuan, 'Humanistic Geography' (1976) 66 *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 266.

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