

Essay

# Poststructural geography and the cultural approach

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# The cultural approach in geography

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## Abstract

This paper is a personal reflection on the role of culture in geography. It was already important in the first phases of human geography (classical geography and the New Geography of the fifties), but the predominant functionalist approaches limited its expression. Thanks to the initiatives of different groups of geographers, the scope of the discipline was enlarged after 1970s: this transformation was characterized in the late 1990s as the cultural turn of the discipline. It was exemplified by the structurationist and poststructuralist developments on one side, the cultural approach on the other. For me, the last one does not suffer from the same limitations than the formers.

**Keywords:** Cultural geography. Poststructuralist geographies. New Geography. Critical geography.

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## A geografia pós-estrutural e a abordagem cultural

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### Resumo

Esta é uma reflexão pessoal sobre o papel da cultura na geografia. Ela era importante já nas primeiras fases da geografia humana (a geografia clássica e a Nova Geografia dos anos 1950), mas as abordagens funcionalistas que predominavam na época limitaram sua expressão. Graças às iniciativas de diferentes grupos de geógrafos, o escopo da disciplina foi ampliado após os anos 1970: no final da década de 1990, essa mudança foi reconhecida como a virada cultural da geografia. De um lado, havia os desenvolvimentos estruturalistas e pós-estruturalistas; de outro, a abordagem cultural. Para mim, o último não sofreu as mesmas limitações que os primeiros.

**Palavras-chave:** Geografia cultural. Geografias pós-estruturalistas. Nova geografia. Geografia crítica.

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# L'approche culturelle en géographie

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## Résumé

Ce texte est une réflexion personnelle sur le rôle de la culture en géographie. Celui-ci fut important dès les premières phases de la géographie humaine (géographie classique et Nouvelle Géographie), mais les approches fonctionnalistes alors dominantes limitaient son expression. Grâce aux initiatives de divers groupes de géographes, le champ de la géographie s'élargit après 1970: cette transformation fut qualifiée à la fin des années 1990 de tournant culturel de la discipline. Il fut illustré, d'un côté, par les développements structurationnistes et post-structuralistes, et de l'autre, par l'approche culturelle. Pour moi, cette dernière ne souffre pas des mêmes limitations que les deux autres.

**Mots-clés:** Géographie culturelle. Géographies post-structuralistes. Nouvelle géographie. Géographie critique.

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More than an academic conference, this communication is a personal reflection of the role of culture in human geography.

The history of modern forms of human geography is 140 years long. I lived it as a witness and up to a point, an actor, since the fifties, 70 years ago. I had many interests in geography, but from the start, culture was an important one. It became dominant 40 years ago.

Anne Buttimer named the new Commission created by the IGU in 1996: "The cultural approach in geography". I chaired this Commission for 8 years and get convinced that its title conveyed perfectly the reason for which culture is so important in geography.

The aim of this paper is to stress the differences between the approaches developed in human geography until the sixties or seventies and those which superseded them after the cultural turn of the discipline. The analysis of the former strands of human geography will be short and consequently, sketchy: it serves only to underline the recent transformation of geography.

## The first forms of human geography, culture and the functional approach

The early human geographers had a limited interest in other social sciences. They chose the physical and natural sciences as epistemological models and tried to develop a rigorous approach: hence their ban on subjectivity, a limited curiosity for human imagination and an emphasis on the rationality of human choices. In such a context, geographic space was mainly conceived as made of rocks, soils, vegetation, animals, human beings, the fields they tilled and the crops they grew, the flocks and herds they bred, the artefacts they used and the houses they built.

## From human settlements to human activity and culture

As basic data on the human presence on the earth surface, geographers chose initially to focus on human settlements and land use (Brunhes, 1910). They soon added to this initial field the analysis of human populations and their activities. The discipline studied the tools they used, the artefacts they produced, the houses they built, the suits they wear, the languages they spoke and the political and administrative institutions they relied on. Geographers observed these facts when doing field work; they took also advantage of the publications made by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, linguists and political scientists, and of the statistics published by public services.

Human populations had specific ways of using and settling land with a clear impact on landscapes. The areas where people shared the same *way of life* offered similar forms of land use: they appeared as *homogeneous regions*.

Culture was in this way central for the new human geography; it was true for Friedrich Ratzel (1885-1888), Eduard Hahn (1896), Paul Vidal de la Blache (1922) or Carl Sauer (Leighly, 1973). At the same time, it did not play an essential role in the explanations. This paradox struck me as soon as the sixties. It had to do with the predominant approach in both classical geography and the New Geography of the fifties and sixties: the functional approach.

## The functional approach

Human geography in its classical form as well as New Geography relied on a functional approach: human beings made rational choices; they tried to maximize their utility. It was out of this type of decisions, and the social mechanisms that insure their coherence, that the world was shaped.

Geographers pay only a scant attention to the imagination and sensibility of human beings. They were conscious of the variety of cultural features according to places, but since they were mainly concerned with their material forms, this curiosity did not modify their dominant functional approach.

The two first orientations of human geography (its classical approach and the New Geography of the fifties and sixties) naturalized the world and considered only a part of human capabilities. They integrated mainly their physiological characteristics, metabolism and ecological imprint; they analyzed the way they exploited their environments, produced goods, consumed or exchanged them ; they did not delve on human sensitivity and imagination. In the beginning of the sixties, some New Geographers even considered that cultural geography will disappear in the future thanks to the progress of the theoretical interpretations of human rational decisions.

## The cultural turn: a collective movement

Two interpretations of the earth surface as transformed by human beings are possible: (i) for some geographers, it is made of a collection of things and beings selected according to their usefulness, which means that they result from rational decisions; (ii) for the others, this collection results from choices realized according to the habits and values (the culture) of the group, which

means that an observer is unable to guess them. The cultural turn was a consequence of a fundamental change from first to the second interpretation: the role of the geographer was no more to look at the world just in the same way as God, but to analyze the way individuals and groups observed, imagined, conceived and tried to shape it according to their interests and ideals. The cultural turn was thus conducive to a prodigious enlargement of the scope of geography and a new interest in the ways people perceive and imagine the world. Human beings ceased to be conceived as naturally equipped with a rational mind. They are shaped by the societies they belong to thanks to the culture they have received.

The cultural turn was the term coined in the late nineties to sum up the transformations geography experienced from the late sixties. It did not result from a particular form of geographical orientation. It was the shared result of a multiplicity of movements: radical geography, the phenomenologist approach – or humanist geography –, systems theory, as well as structurationist and poststructuralist movements.

### **The enlargement of the geographic field**

The functionalist approach tried to explain the way societies worked according mainly to an economic perspective. It stressed productive activities. It considered also power relations, but only those relative to States, their politics of domination and their armies.

Human geography was mainly interested in men, since they were responsible for productive tasks when women were in charge with those of reproduction, which appeared less important. Attention was centered on male adults. It was among them that armies, responsible for the strength of nations, were recruited.

Geographers focused on commercial productions and neglected self-production, even if it was still dominant in many parts of the world. Commercial exchange was fully developed only in industrialized countries: as a consequence, white people were more studied than the others. Blacks, Indians or Chinese people were only mentioned where they worked in tropical plantations.

Geography deals today with a deeply enlarged field. The breaking up with functionalism disrupts the old conception of geography. Women, children and old persons are today considered as important as male adults. There is a keen curiosity for dominated groups, dropouts and foreigners. The emerging world is as much valued than Western societies.

Mainly interested in productive activities, the geography of yesterday ignored the periods when economic life was disturbed by climatic catastrophes, cyclic crises or wars. Political geography dealt more with diplomacy and Empire building than with military conflicts. The deep poverty of whole populations was only mentioned as a picturesque element of many foreign countries.

Contemporary geography studies the feminine half of humanity, forgotten ages, non-productive people, victims of social exclusion or prisoners. It includes both the areas where societies appear as normal ones and the *heterotopia*, these counter-spaces they need, but where the rules normally enforced upon everyone are not applied. It is equally interested in prosperity and poverty. To the periods of happiness, it opposes the times of stress and doom; it delves on death and the different ways it is institutionalized.

The enlarged scope of geography covers all the aspects of the life and culture of human groups. The rational dimension of thought does not disappear, but it is only one facet of brain activity. An equal attention is devoted to the exploration of imaginaries, their variety, the preferences they create and the environments they contribute to shape. The analysis of feasts and leisure and the creation and management of scenery are added to that of productive activities.

## **The study of representations, imagination and imaginaries**

The enlargement of the discipline is conducive to a new emphasis on representations. Both poststructuralism and the cultural approach deal with those that grew out of a sensitive perception of environment, its images and the narratives it induces. Landscapes appear as pleasant or trite. They often evoke other places and other times. Some are colored with joy, happiness and a sense of fulfilment. Others arouse in us feelings of gloom, nostalgia or fear. Dream changes them, magnifies some places, makes them desirable or fraught with terror and confer them the frightening charm of sublime. Images provoke strong reactions: a photo of a white sand beach with palm trees is enough to give birth to a desire for rest and idleness; a view of long snowy slopes reminds us of the pleasure of skiing.

Travelers and writers describe the world and infuse it with their sensitivity. Photographs and cameramen choose the perspectives and lights that magnify places. The painter as well as the novelist rely on imaginaries. They inspire the film-maker. They are exploited by the developer of touristic spots and the tour operator proposing itineraries and sojourns adapted to the preferences of his customers. They motivate tourists in the choice of their destination. The scenery people are dreaming are sometimes transformed into brick and stone: Walt Disney's movies have given birth to Disneylands and Disneyworlds!

An essential form of imaginaries results in this way from the blending of human experience of the world with affective reactions. It shapes the way the World is perceived. People like to find the forms, colors, smells and sounds of their dreams in what they discover.

It is because tourism is now conceived for what it is really – an original way to consume space – that people are now able to understand its genesis and evolution. The *Géographies de Gauguin* (Staszak, 2003) is a wonderful illustration of this new approach.

## **New models of man**

The functional approaches dominated until the late 1960s. For them, human beings were naturally endowed with reason, which meant that their decisions were not dependent on local traditions: it gave women and men the capability to make choices independently of local conditions and their own culture. With the cultural turn, the perspective changed. The inherited part of human capabilities is a small one. Their major part is transferred from person to person and generation to generation: culture plays a central part in the construction of human beings. What is passed down is made of three parts. (i) Practices and know-hows are largely duplicated by imitation – it is the non-representational part of culture. It was for a long time ignored by geographers. Nigel Thrift (2007) showed its importance for the discipline.

(ii) Reason is built through the transmission of rules of coherence, which means that even if it is conveyed by culture, it does not vary from a person to the next one. (iii) Imagination relies on the transmission of information, but also on the sharing of emotions, which explains at the same time its fecundity and its variability.

Two interpretations of these processes have been developed during the cultural turn: (i) the structurationist followed by the poststructuralist one and (ii) the cultural one. Their difference is rooted in their interpretation of the respective dynamics of intelligence and imagination in the passing down processes.

## **Structurationist and poststructuralist geographies**

The sixties and seventies were the time when the critical conception of science gave birth to philosophies of deconstruction, a continuation of the Frankfurt school of sociology of the interwar period. The movement was especially influential during the eighties, the time when poststructuralist geographies appeared, but it had previously an impact on the structurationist movement, especially important in Britain from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties.

### **The structurationist movement**

The structurationist movement drew its inspiration from three main sources: (1) Torstein Hägerstrand's time geography (Hägerstrand, 1970), which stressed the necessity for geography as well as for social sciences to analyze the spatial dimension of social processes, (2) Antonio Gramsci's (Gramsci, 1981[1966]) theory of hegemony, which gave a more social and cultural dimension to the geography of power, and (3) Anthony Giddens' (Giddens, 1979, 1981) interest in the role of locales in the genesis of practices.

In this way, structurationism made practices a central part of social dynamics, and introduced the idea that they were often shaped by the hegemony of a ruling class. This part of structurationism was fully integrated into the poststructuralist views.

One of the weaknesses of both structurationism and poststructuralism came from this emphasis on practices, and a relative neglect of the role of institutionalized relations in the genesis of social behavior (Claval, 1973).

### **Poststructuralism and geography**

The poststructuralist interpretation stresses the fact that the transmission of cultures is conditioned by those who spread information: they serve as models in the non-representational case; their narratives are organized in such a way that they encapsulate elements conducive to their automatic reproduction.

### **Michel Foucault and discursive formations**

In the case of narratives, the main authority was Michel Foucault (1966, 1970). His thesis was built on the conviction that the construction of knowledge was a three stages process:

(i) each language imposed a categorization of reality through the words it used, (ii) the intermediary level, generally ignored by social scientists, was the time when power and reason cooperated to formulate crude explanations and (iii) the third level was the scientific one, when reason became dominant and presented coherent and rigorous explanations.

Foucault called *épistémès* the narratives produced at the intermediary level in *Les Mots et les choses* (Foucault, 1966). He named them *discursive formations* in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Foucault, 1970); they included elements he called *utterances* (*énoncés*), which had the property to be automatically duplicated when transmitted from one person to the next one. It meant that the groups who produced and diffused discursive formations imposed them on all the recipients.

Edward Said (1978) played a central role in the diffusion of Foucault's ideas: his book on *orientalism* insured their universal success.

## **Pierre Bourdieu and habitus**

For non-representational forms of passing down, Pierre Bourdieu used a notion first introduced by Aristoteles and developed by Thomas Aquinas who gave it the name of *habitus*; it was introduced into French sociology by Émile Durkheim at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through education and later forms of social intercourse, people integrate in their personality habits and reflexes, which make them act along patterns unconsciously imported.

Since habitus was passed down through education and the imitation of adults by children, people did not perceive it as something imposed upon them from outside. The process of incorporation was unconscious: individuals considered their beliefs as personal, when, in fact, they were produced by the ruling groups. Domination was in this way insured through a unharmed and silent process.

Instead of conceiving individuals as beings naturally endowed with reason, which meant that their characteristics were the same everywhere, poststructuralist geographers saw in them the product of a passing down process which equipped them with reflexes, know-hows, knowledge and beliefs produced by dominant groups. Individuals received in the same way symbols and emotional experiences, that nurtured their imagination and gave birth to shared imaginaries.

## **From processes of identification/differentiation to matrices of domination**

In the poststructuralist perspective, the identity of human beings does not result from differences in their natural endowment: it is a social construction. A person feels close to a group; in order to be accepted by it, he stresses its differences with the others. This process is a cumulative one. At the end, others are often deprived from their humanity...

When two different groups enjoy similar positions in the social hierarchy, the process of identification/differentiation is a symmetrical one. When they occupy unequal positions, the upper groups formulate ideas and feelings and impose them on the lower one through the



diffusion of *discursive formations* and *habitus*. These *matrices of domination* are rooted in race, gender and class<sup>1</sup> (Staskak; Debarbieux; Pieroni, 2017).

Poststructuralist geographies insist in this way on the domination processes that give advantages (i) to the civilizations, which are able to develop military as well as propaganda weapons – the Western world since the Renaissance mainly, (ii) to men who subjugated and exploited women since the beginnings of mankind thanks to the patriarchal systems they built, and (iii) to the innovators who drove the industrial revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and imposed in this way the supremacy of capitalists over other classes.

Domination results from the use of force and physical constraint, the control of *means* of production and, to a very large extent, the performative effects of narratives imagined by the ruling groups.

These geographies deconstruct the basis of the Western success in focusing on the forms of exploitation upon which it relied.

## The revolutionary dimension of constructivism

The interpretation of human beings developed by poststructuralism is a constructivist one: human bodies are conceived as the supports of social realities. Individuals do not exist by themselves. They always reflect external influences. It means that the human World is a conventional one. As it exists today, it reflects the dominance and power of minorities that shaped it in order to exploit the majority of human beings to their own advantage.

As a result, many of today geographers conceive themselves as agents of a new revolution. Their aim is to build a more equalitarian society respectful towards nature. They try to free human beings from the inequality of classes, from the chains of race and from the gender categories imposed by patriarchal societies: *queer* geographies are in this way instrumental in building social environments allowing for a liberation of sex.

In this sense, poststructuralist geographies are conceived as a tool for shaping a better world.

## Subaltern geographies

The poststructuralist movement is not only based on the deconstruction of dominant geographies. It explores spatial processes and realities that has been ignored until recently. In former colonies, geographers focused on the role of colonizers and the local elites cooperating with them. In India, a movement developed from the sixties in order to analyze the lower indigenous classes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. They were difficult to study, since official censuses were not centered on them. Some archives existed, however, and going systematically through them, it was possible to build another interpretation of colonial societies. Indian scholars began to speak of subaltern studies.

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical view: Claval (2022).

These studies do not explore societies from the top. They start from the bottom and move up. They stress the role of peasants, handworkers, peddlers, small shopkeepers; they explore barter and different forms of economic solidarity. They are interested in religious movements. They analyze the syncretism resulting from the intercourse between native and imported beliefs, religions or ideologies. In America, they focus on the different forms of Afro-American cults. They offer an interpretation of societies and spatial organizations, which stresses the inventiveness of their lower and middle strata. They underline the forms of passive resistance to the prevailing order. They insist on the resilience of the popular milieu.

## **The space of poststructuralist geographies**

Poststructuralist geographers propose a new conception of human beings and their environmental relations. They do not focus exclusively on their productive activities and are more open to the way they live and experience their environment. People are sensitive to the sight, sounds and smells of the places they live in or visit. As a result, geographers begin to stress the role of sensitivity in the valuation of space.

Space is from then on characterized by the *spatial devices* (dispositifs spatiaux) it incorporates. In a sense, this expression is just a new way to name what was previously known as spatial or regional structures. But it stresses something which is new and essential: these structures are not natural features; they are manmade and conceived in order to achieve specific aims.

## **The limits of the poststructuralist approach in geography**

Poststructuralism owes an essential part of its success to its critical dimension. As every other form of theoretical construction, it has to be submitted to a critical analysis. The postulates upon which rely the matrices of dominations are fragile. It is true as well of Gramsci's hegemony, Foucault's discursive formations or Bourdieu's habitus.

Foucault's analysis of the diffusion of discursive formations is based on *utterances*, the elements which structured these narratives and explain the way their organization and content remained intact when passed down. But the utterance is an elusive notion. *Archéologie du Savoir* is a difficult and often obscure book. After 1975, Foucault ceased to stress the role of narratives in his analysis of power. He gave a very nuanced interpretation of their role in a later book:

Narratives, no more than silences, are not once for all submitted to a power or set against it. A complex and unstable play has to be supposed, in which the narrative may be at the same time and instrument and effect of power, but also an obstacle, a stopper, a point of resistance and of departure for an opposite strategy. The narrative vehicles and products power; it reinforces it, but also mines it, makes it an easy target for criticism and blocks its way (Foucault, 1976, p. 133).

It appears impossible to build a matrix of dominance on so diverse an element!

Bourdieu's *habitus* may also be interpreted in different ways. It is true that human beings owe to their education the signs they use, the codes they mobilize and the attitudes they display: these elements come from their culture and are an expression of their social origin. It is also true that there are so naturally passed down from a generation to the next one that they are not perceived as coming from outside. But does it mean that they preclude any form of individual initiative? No. Bourdieu is perfectly explicit on this point: the translation he realized of Erwin Panofsky's *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique* offered him the possibility to discover another aspect of *habitus*:

To oppose individuality and collectivity in order to better preserve the rights of creative individuality and the mysteries of the unique creation is to refuse to discover individuality under the disguise of culture – in the meaning of cultivation, of *Bildung* – or for speaking as Erwin Panofsky, under the shape of the *habitus* through which the creator is indebted to his collectivity and his time, and which orients and directs, without his own's knowledge, the apparently most unique creative acts (Bourdieu, 1967, p. 142).

For Bourdieu, the *habitus* was not fundamentally a process that deprived human beings from their creativity: it encapsulates it in a social framework, which is different.

The use by the poststructuralist approach of Foucault's discursive formations or Bourdieu's *habitus* went certainly well beyond what these authors intended. It was conducive to a systematic deconstruction of the core values of many societies. It put an excessive emphasis on matrices of domination: the resulting perspective offered to researchers the opportunity of exploring the effects of hierarchical structures, forms of power and control as well as subaltern geographies. At the same time, it deprived them from the curiosity to explore completely the whole range of communication, identification/differentiation processes and imaginaries: as a result, poststructuralism ignored a part of the ways culture weights on human distributions.

### **The pure cultural approach**

The pure cultural approach in geography is akin to the structuralist one. Both of them participated in the cultural turn of the discipline. Both of them display a new curiosity for representations and imaginaries. They share a much-enlarged scope and an interest in cultural processes, either communication or distinction ones. They differ mainly in respect to the autonomy they recognize to human beings. The structuralist approach stresses the role of control and domination. The cultural approach does not ignore them, but for it, they are not present everywhere and every time: they cannot be inferred exclusively through the invocation of narratives formations, *habitus* or intellectual hegemony; in each case, their role has to be precisely assessed.

## Processes of communication

The cultural approach is attentive (i) to the influence of media on communication and (ii) to the formation of opinion.

(1) In primitive societies, transmission occurred directly through what people saw and listened to. These processes had a short range: a few meters only. All the elements of a culture were passed down in this way within a local circle.

The situation was different in historic societies. Most people were still unable to write and read, which meant that their culture remained local: as a consequence, the forms of daily life and productive technics changed over short distances. Upper classes were partly relying on oral communication, but they were up to a point literate. It meant that the social technics and religious beliefs they shared were spread over large areas. In this way, these groups imposed their political power and doctrinal modes of religiosity (Claval, 1980, 2008, 2022; Whitehouse, 2004) on lower classes, but were unable to get them rid of the deeply rooted popular forms of their more spectacular and older forms of religiosity.

The situation changed with the printing press and the growing literacy it allowed. It took another character with the modern medias, able to transfer instantly at any distance sounds, images and movies. Popular cultures of the past were replaced by mass cultures – and later on, with Internet and the cellular phones, by a proliferation of cultures of niche. At the same time, the technical progress gave to elites a new mastery of productive processes. People were overwhelmed by information, with no control upon its content: it was the time of fake news.

(2) Communication did not serve only to pass down information unilaterally. It was also made of dialogs and the ensuing formation of shared or opposite opinions. Dialogs were open to everyone in primitive societies as well as in the popular components of the traditional ones. Where communication began to rely on writing, a large part of it took a hierarchical form, which left little room for the development of a public opinion. The printing press and the mail services modified this situation: intellectual and political elites discussed new ideas in the new tea rooms or coffee-shops, or by mail. These exchanges produced shared opinions (Habermas, 1978). Their form and content were up to a point controlled by editors and publishers and then diffused by journals or books. The existence of a public opinion of this type was a necessary condition for the smooth functioning of democracies. Since the contents of the news diffused by the new social networks escape now to any control, a more unstable form of public opinion is becoming dominant and explains the rise of illiberal democracies (Claval, 2020, [en ligne]).

## Processes of identity/distinction and competition for status

The cultural approach does not focus only on communication processes. It offers new perspectives in the fields of identity building and social forms of competition.

Social competition has not always as aim to sort out those who are members of a group and those who are excluded. It may also tend to distinguish individuals within a group according to the way they conform to its values. In a religious society, it is important to live more completely the shared faith and appear more charitable than the others. In a society based on martial values, it is good to train oneself as a warrior and display courage and heroism. In an artistic society, it is through their creativity that some writers, painters or musicians outmatch the others. In a group centered on science, it is through her (or his) outstanding results in the field of research that a woman or a man wins prestige.

Social competition is not based only on economic or power targets. Its aim is also to win *consideration* from others and enjoy, as a result, a desirable *status*. It is one of the main differences between the poststructuralist and cultural approaches. The first one remains akin to functional approaches as far as it stresses mainly the role of competition for power and wealth. The second one considers another form of competition, the aim of which is not to control or exploit the others, but to gain their support.

Introducing in this way a third mechanism of social competition means that the whole discipline has to be restructured: economic competition is rarely a pure one, since its aim is often to gain a higher *status* rather than to enjoy a higher income; a power position is always a complex one, since it combines the use of force and physical constraint and the supervision of others on one side, and the respect of *authority* on the other. As a result, the social divisions within a society are not only based on income and power, i. e. on socio-economic classes, but also on prestige and status.

Space is not only an *arena* where people compete for wealth or power: they struggle also for *fame*. Space ceases to be only analyzed in terms of *fertility*, *accessibility* and *amenity*. It is valued in terms of *visibility*, that resulting from direct contacts and face-to-face relations as well as that conveyed by written texts and images and, with an increased efficiency, by the modern technologies of communication.

## **The imaginaries of other worlds**

(1) Imaginaries show that spatial organization is not ruled only by economic competition and politic power. Space is appreciated for its beauty and harmony, the serenity of many landscapes or the emotion arising from the bursting out of natural forces. It is valued since it is fashionable: it is important to live in some places and to avoid other places, cities or regions. The French historian Jules Michelet (1966[1833]) gave in this way a psychological interpretation of the geography of 19<sup>TH</sup> century France, each region contributing by its moral virtues to the personality of the country. In a similar way, Delissen (2004, p. 17-18) underscores the weight held by moral considerations in the regional organization of space in pre-modern Korea.

The cultural approach in geography shares with the poststructuralist one a curiosity for the way imagination transforms the representations of landscapes, the people who inhabit or visit them, and their atmospheres.

(2) There is, however, another form of imaginary. It does not picture, poetize and load with emotion the face of the earth. It builds other worlds. The poststructuralist approach does not focus on it since it is not directly rooted in material evidence.

Human spirit has the faculty to imagine things with no material existence. Their building either rely on the logical and controlled capacities of reason or on the power of imagination. Philosophers speak of the transcendental dimension of human spirit: metaphysics explore the significance of the transcendent or immanent objects built in this way. Geographers have to consider them, since these imagined spheres play an essential role in organizing human activity.

One of the fundamental lessons of political geography is the following one: an idea is all the more valued since it comes from sources located faraway in space or in time (Claval, 1978, [en ligne]). The authority of the spectacular forms of religiosity (the religions of myth) was rooted in the distant past of the immemorial (Whitehouse, 2004). The authority of the doctrinal forms of religiosity came from the celestial source of the Revelation. The authority of the rational forms of religiosity (i. e. metaphysics) was associated with the transcendental dimension of human reason (Claval, 2022). A new form of religiosity, ideology, appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Claval, 1980, 2008). Its sources were terrestrial, but located in a Golden Age of the past, a Land without Evil of the present or a Utopia of the future, the three of them being out of reach of contemporary human beings; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other spaces produced by human minds were increasingly located in the unconscious dimensions of nature, economy or language.

The other worlds are permeated with values, which do not exist naturally in the reality we observe. Their role is to provide human societies with ethical models they are unable to build out of the observation of empirical things. It is because human beings have the capability to imagine other worlds that they are able to build a social space permeated with values.

Social space is not a natural one. It is a social construction. It is built through rituals and ceremonies transforming the ordinary space of nature into a valued one. The human beings who evolve in this world are twice born: from the womb of their mother and through baptism and other rites of passage which integrate them into the society. As soon as they have an impact on the organization and functioning of a society, human relations are also institutionalized.

It is for that reason that the nature of social space is not the same according to places or areas. There are sacred places or areas where the immemorial or celestial worlds of myth or revelation are encroaching on the earth surface, or quasi-sacred space where the Golden Age, the Land without Evil and Utopia are in some way present. The *heterotopias* of Foucault are incorporated in the social space in another way: they are parts of it, but the moral rules normally effective everywhere are there ignored.

The imaginary of other worlds explains how values are introduced into terrestrial affairs and create in this way a social sphere - a sphere of values.

Because we are living in a world where people attribute different values to nature, landscapes, social institutions and institutions, the ways geographical research is organized have to change completely. What is asked from a geographer is not to cast a glance as keen as God's one on environments and social groups. It is to analyze the glances cast upon their surroundings, their region, their nation and the World by the populations he is studying. He has to be modest: he ceases to be the creator of a universal geography; he is the translator of a multiplicity of lived geographies – which have sometimes a universal dimension.

Such orientations show that the cultural approach opens to our discipline areas until then reserved to philosophers – the field of ontology in particular.

## **The dynamics of accomplishment**

The cultural approach manifests a strong interest in the competition for prestige: this one is often based on the pursuit of types of achievements that are at the same time social and personal. In competing for status, the individual conforms his behavior to an ethical ideal and accumulate in this way a moral capital. It gives a significance to his life and orients it toward a target.

As a result, geography is partly shaped by the efforts of people to carry out feats and confer exemplarity to their life: it is, in a way, the sum of myriads of individual achievements.

The geographical marks of the pursuit of achievement were already studied by Greek geographers (Strabo, Denys of Alexandria) or touristic guides (Pausanias) as well as by Arabic travelers (Ibn Battuta).

## **Conclusion**

The cultural approach develops an interest in all the cultural processes: those that are characterized by the rigor of reason as well as those relying on the facilities of imagination and giving birth to the imaginaries of other worlds. It delves on the moral and normative dimension of the human world, which results from the institution of the cosmos, nature, human beings, society, social institutions and space, and notes the universality of this process. The building of celestial or unconscious other worlds is inherent to the capacities of human mind and reflects also the role of communication.

The cultural approach takes into consideration the efforts of human individuals and groups for surpassing themselves or doing away with their deep instincts. It shows the role of the anti-worlds built on repressed drives – and thus explains the structure of heterotopias.

The cultural approach takes into consideration the dynamics of individual and collective accomplishments. It does not ignore the dynamics of domination, exploitation and exclusion, which are central to the structuralist approach, but questions their generality: it deconstructs a part of its pretensions.

The cultural approach provokes a complete restructuring of the whole discipline.

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