

MODULE 2.1

QUESTIONS OF ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY: PEOPLE, SOCIETY AND NATURE

People and Nature: People are part of nature. Like other animals, our material reproduction depends on an interaction with the rest of nature. We are part of food chains, therefore, as well as of (e.g.) the hydrological cycle,¹ nitrogen, carbon cycles, etc. People are also different from other species, and natural forms. Unlike other animals we are able to intervene in food chains, the various cycles, which we do, for good or ill, through labor: draining the land, irrigating it, constructing reservoirs. We have the unique capacity to develop understandings about the rest of nature, act on those understandings, ‘solve’² imminent problems in our relation with it, and generally revolutionize our relation to it.³ Recall here what Marx said about the labor process:

“We presuppose labor in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labor process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.” (Capital Vol 1, pp.283-284. Penguin edition).

In other words, people have reasons for what they do. Their labor is purposive. Bees don’t have reasons.⁴ Instead of acting, in the sense of engaging in something purposive, they merely behave, though presumably their ability to do this has been determined by evolutionary selection of the appropriate genetic traits.

This is important in thinking through the differences between human and physical geography and

¹ Even the Pope is 69% water.

² In scare-quotes because our interventions aimed at solving problems, often result in unintended side-effects of an undesirable nature, which then have to be ‘solved’ in their turn.

³ Other animals don’t have industrial revolutions!

⁴ And nor do other non-social objects – non-social in the sense of not concept dependent for what they do – like atoms, chromosomes, cloud droplets.

the methods appropriate to each. The laws governing atoms, cloud droplets, packets of ascending or descending air, the transport of material by running water, are universal, though we may not yet have discovered all there is to know about them, amended them in the light of further research, and so on. In human geography, however, people can change their relation to the rest of nature through, among other things, technology. In consequence, the geography of the automobile age is very different from that of the age of the canal. New human geographies come into being because of these new processes. Physical geographies change too – land gets eroded away, material is deposited on flood plains, urban heat islands develop with urbanization – but the processes of erosion, deposition, radiation, remain the same.

People and Society: Their social relations are a necessary precondition for the labor of humans. There is a material side to this. People work with each other through a division of labor, for example. Access to the means of labor and the means of production, including nature, is mediated by socially determined rules; these may be formalized as property rights. These material practices, however, are mediated by what are called ‘intersubjective meanings’ – shared understandings. In order to coordinate a division of labor, for example, or to exercise property rights, people have to know what is meant when asked to do so-and-so, or when faced by a sign that says ‘Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted’. Meanings are constitutive of material practices. People can’t do things unless they ‘know’ what to do, understand that when working with sharp blades, they need to exercise caution, and so on. But these meanings have to be shared and, in order to condition practices that are not only material but also social in character, they obviously have to be socially produced and negotiated, and held by those engaging in the practice. It is said of such meanings that they are ‘inter-subjectively held’.

Since they pertain to material practices, meanings also have to ‘work’. But this is not just a technical issue: does such and such a manipulation of raw-materials, the use of drills, saws and so on in particular ways, result in what you intended: a table? Labor, recall, is not just a technical matter of bringing the worker into contact with instruments of labor and objects of labor. It is also social involving things like who owns the instruments of labor, the labor power, the objects of labor. Capitalists may want workers to be ‘punctual’, to keep ‘good time’, to be continually active. Workers have to learn the meaning of punctuality, and keeping good time, to avoid

lengthy visits to the rest room and so on. Today we accept these meanings of wage work, but at the dawn of the capitalist era they were strongly resisted. Only by dint of sanctions, particularly the firing of those flouting workshop rules, and the narrowing of the alternatives to wage work (laws against poaching, the creation of the punitive workhouse system) were they accepted. The same goes for private property. The idea of exclusion was initially contested and only the sanctions of the law allowed for the widespread imposition of its meaning. Today in South Africa this meaning is still being contested by illegal grazing and hunting by Africans on the land of white farmers and by the burning of corn and haystacks.

Note finally how meanings also presuppose certain material practices. Such practices as ‘retirement’, ‘old age pensions’, and the common fact of relative infirmity, ‘old people’s homes’, senior citizen rates in cinemas, make the idea of a particular stage of the life cycle that we call ‘old age’ meaningful. Historically the idea of ‘childhood’ as a stage of life secluded from the world of work, a stage of innocence, is relatively recent. Again, it is conditional upon certain material practices: the introduction of mandatory schooling, the emergence of children’s literature that accompanied child literacy, the specialization of health care and the recognition of children as posing unique challenges, among other things.

Social relations are crucial to understanding human geographies because they create a framework of limits and possibilities that conditions human action of a geographically transforming kind: actions like locating, migrating, any sort of movement or land use change, the production of landscapes like that of the shopping center or suburbia or the gentrified neighborhood (with its brick, tree-lined, streets and old fashioned street lights), the production of networks like those that tie together the different plants and facilities of a multi-national corporation. As social relations change, so too do human geographies. For most of human history human geographies were relatively *unchanging*, at least as far as one can reconstruct. But with the advent of capitalism and its particular framework of social conditions, rapid change has been the order of the day: massive urbanization followed by suburbanization; the creation of new industrial areas alongside rustbelts; the emergence of Newly Industrializing Countries alongside those that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century; the creation of new roles in the geographic divisions of labor: retirement regions like Arizona and Florida, cities specializing in financial

services, new industrial areas specializing in something unheard of forty years ago – ‘hitech.’ And then there are the ongoing processes of globalization and localization. These are huge changes that are inconceivable outside of processes of technological change, of increasing labor productivity that are themselves inconceivable outside of the incentive structure of capitalism; the necessity, that is, of people of money to accumulate more money or risk losing it; and the necessity of the broad mass of the population to go to work for them.

Because of its concern with acts of location and environmental transformation, human geography has to have assumptions about the social relations into which people enter, regardless of their will. Human geographies are *a production* and we need to know why they get produced. For much of its history human geography was able to avoid making assumptions. It did so by focusing on relations between people and their environment. Individuals confronted nature and adapted to its demands, altered it in various ways. In retrospect, and in the light of political ecology’s approach, we now know that society was a missing part of the framework that human geographers of an environmental relations sort – ranging from Semple at one end of the spectrum to Sauer at the other – employed. It was only with the SQR that human geography started getting a little more interested in drawing upon ideas about social relations. This took the specific form of recognition of the importance of markets in understanding human geographies: labor markets and migration, real estate markets and urban land value distributions; and how the goal of profit maximization – inseparable from the fact of markets – conditioned industrial location and various allocation processes such as those governing distribution to different markets. This was a major step forward. Initially spatial-quantitative geographers had been more interested in identifying pattern or regularity in human geography: the spacing of settlements, for example. But as they turned their attention to explanation they looked in the direction of location theory. Much of this had been the work of German economists, notably Johan Von Thunen, Alfred Weber and August Losch. And as economists, of course, they brought their economists, their understanding of those particular social forms commodity exchange and the market, to bear on questions of location.

Since then, human geographers’ understandings of the social process and of its multiple facets, has advanced greatly. There is now much more sensitivity to questions of power, institutions,

culture, communication, modes of cooperation like the division of labor and the like. An especially useful statement on these different aspects, which ties them altogether has come from Harvey. This is set out and discussed in the Appendix. Unlike some appendices, this is one that you *must* read. As you read it, think about the different aspects or ‘moments’ as they are described there, and how they might apply to your own particular research projects.

People, Society and Nature: Since labor is always socially mediated and since it has to do with material interventions into nature, the harnessing of natural forces and substances, their conversion for human use, any conceptualization of the relations between people and nature has to be social from the start. There is, nevertheless, a stream of thought in work on people-nature relations that brackets, inadvertently or not, those social relations of property rights, material incentive frameworks, shared understandings and the like. Malthus is an example; no social relations there, just a biological relationship between people, and between people and their food supply. Obviously people have intervened in this relationship through various practices ranging from birth control measures to raising the productivity of the land. All these are social in character. Birth control was something that had to be fought for before it was accepted, and there is still resistance to spreading information about it. There is also a literature that claims that technical change in agriculture, at least in pre-capitalist societies is a function of population increase. But where did the knowledge of new techniques come from, get diffused, overcome social prejudice perhaps? For further discussion of this crucial point about people-nature relations, see the Appendix.

The Question of Agency and Structure: One of the most vexing, difficult, issues in social theory, including human geography, has been the relationship between structure and agency; between, that is, assigning causal responsibility to what might be called ‘social influences’ on the one hand and the creativity of the individual on the other. A good deal of mainstream work licenses a view that might be called socially determinist: people act as they do in virtue of their social positions. Voting studies in which voting preference is cross-classified with measures of class, age, gender and so forth provide an example; likewise those studies in the so-called geography of crime which correlate crime rates with aggregate poverty levels across neighborhoods and the like.

These approaches have been criticized because of their failure to incorporate the sheer unpredictability of individuals, their ability to go against the current, to develop new ways of looking at the world and to act on those ways. This in turn, however, risks the opposing sin of voluntarism. This is notably apparent in what have been called ‘great men’ theories of history; the idea, that is, that history undergoes sharp changes in its concrete trajectory as a result of the interventions of particularly prescient, charismatic, strong-willed or whatever, men (rarely women, apparently). So we have the view that the world would have been very different without (among others) Napoleon, George Washington, Charles de Gaulle, Abraham Lincoln, Hitler, Stalin, Winston Churchill, Mrs Thatcher, and on and on. There are also geographic versions of this; ‘great men’ theories of human geography – without Henry Ford, then no Detroit; without Nuffield, no automobile plants in Oxford, without Bismarck, no Germany, without Levitt, no mass produced suburban housing, without Hewlett and Packard ...

There is an obvious retort to this. As Marx notably said:

“Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.”

This is very important. People can only do what they do with the various raw-materials, social and otherwise, to hand. What they do is socially conditioned. Hitler could only do what he did in virtue of the demoralized state of the German people; take away the depression, the punitive terms of the Versailles peace treaty, and the chances of a Hitler would have been very small. And so too is it with people making geography; Henry Ford succeeded in virtue of the propitious location that Detroit occupied, close to the center of American consumer markets, accessible to coal and iron ore for the manufacture of steel at his famous River Rouge plant, and in a town that already occupied a niche in the production of personal means of transportation in the form of horse drawn carriages. And if it had not been Henry Ford then it very likely would have been someone else. His major contribution was the assembly line but this had already been prefigured in the meat packing industry, so it is unlikely that, given the intense competition of the capitalist marketplace, that someone in the auto production business would not have alighted on it sooner or later.

There have been attempts to combine the roles of social structure and agency respectively. According to one popular version, people create societies and then those social forms react back upon, condition, the activities of people. One can certainly see how, indeed, people invent / create new social forms: how things like the joint stock form have to be legislated, how the idea of insurance evolved over time through many, many incremental acts, how social environments are brought into being through acts of government or private firms: think of the implications of the automobile for social life, for example. So by the same token, those social forms affect human actions: insurance affects people's saving habits, the joint stock firm, their investment practices and so on, and so on.

This might, therefore, seem an appealing way of negotiating the problem posed by the co-existence of agency and social structure. Social structure clearly has effects and so does agency. But there are certain difficulties with it.

First, people don't create the social forms that then feed back and influence them. Many of those social forms were there before they were. They preceded them. They were surely the product of human activity; social forms don't just appear without human intervention. But many are the product of previous generations, modified by later ones, and so on.

Second, a lot of practice is not about producing new social forms but about reproducing them. When you deposit money in a bank account you are helping reproduce the banking system; when you purchase an automobile you are, whether you like it or not, helping to reproduce the extraordinary low density suburbanization of American cities; when people take on certain jobs they are reproducing the division of labor, and so on.

Third, people don't create social forms out of nothing. They draw on existing social structures, including those that are the legacy of past human activities.

In sum, social structure is the reproduced and transformed condition of human activity. It is in virtue of social structures that people are able to act, but when they act they may be reproducing rather than transforming them. This is what is called the transformational model, and was

developed by the major figure in critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, but it has been mirrored by the formulations of a number of others, including Anthony Giddens. It is a highly abstract formulation which raises many questions when you come to apply it, but attention to it ensures that some silly mistakes can be avoided.

APPENDIX: Essential Moments of the Social Process

In thinking about social processes, as we must if we are to come to terms with the particular human geographies we are interested in, it is helpful to think of their essential aspects. Harvey in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Chapter 4: 78-79) lists six of these. We could do worse than think about how they are relevant to our particular problems and how they relate one to another. So, and in no particular order:

1. *A Discursive Aspect*: By discourse we refer to the various coded ways in which people communicate one with another. Not just language but also landscape, for example. Ever thought why in medieval European cities the cathedral was always at the center? Or why in the case of some Southern towns a major highway has been named after ‘Martin Luther King’ but in others, it is only a little used side street that has been so renamed?

2. *A Power Relations Aspect*: Social relations are sanctioned and the resources brought to bear in that sanctioning – the power of knowledge, of money, of the law, perhaps – are unevenly distributed. Some are more dependent than others and are dependent on specific others.

3. *A Material Aspect*: Social processes take into account the material aspects of nature, including other human beings; what they are materially capable of, susceptible to. We see this very plainly in production and reproduction (both social and sexual). The labor process involves bringing things together with complementary material properties, and the success of the labor process depends on getting the mix right; you wouldn’t use a carpenter to rewire a house. But material possibilities and constraints also form a necessary aspect of other social processes (think about it in connection with such disparate forms of activity as sport, punishment, schooling, driving a car). What we call technology is a material aspect of the social process and it obviously conditions the social process, as in the role of telecommunications.

4. *The Imaginary*: We cannot understand any social process without some ideas about what animates the individuals participating in it; ideas about values, needs, desire, belief and fantasy. This includes the interpretive frameworks through which people develop an understanding of the world and a set of beliefs on which they can act with some confidence. It also includes the variable meanings we assign to different consumer goods and to the simple act, say, of eating; more than just nutrition, it is also often a social occasion.

5. *The Institutional*: This refers to relatively durable forms of organization of social relations. This can include rules governing markets, the upbringing of children and the like. It also includes corporate bodies like states, firms, NGOs, universities, and families which, through *their* rules, organize large areas of social life.

6. *Social Relations*: Social processes are, well, social. They involve relations of cooperation as in divisions of labor, the family, recreation, the firm, and the relations, like those of commodity exchange, into which people enter in order to produce. Cooperation is rarely on equal terms, however, so social relations are also structured hierarchically: gender, age, caste, and the like.

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Now note the following about these six different aspects.

First, they are not just related one to another; they are *internally* related which means ‘necessarily’: you can’t have one without the other – no labor process without a thought behind it, for example.. Material relations are invariably and necessarily social relations, rule governed, discursively mediated, incomprehensible without some understanding of people’s beliefs and values, and structured by power relations. Discourse is shared so it is simultaneously social, it is a material process involving technologies of production and dissemination (like the printing press), it is infused with power (discourse for whom?), it reflects the values of at least some, is institutionalized through (e.g.) firm structures, rules governing the validity of discursive claims, etc. The same applies to the other aspects of the social process: test it out for yourselves.

Second, there is a missing ‘aspect’ from Harvey’s discussion. Strangely it is the spatial. But

again, note how each of the six aspects defined by Harvey has a spatial aspect, and necessarily so since all social interaction is over space and areal differentiation means power differences (the oil of the Middle East), the geographic differentiation of discourse and so on. So seven necessary aspects to the social process?