

## MODULE 2

### QUESTIONS OF ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Arguably the defining event of twentieth century geography was the spatial-quantitative revolution (SQR). We need to set this beside the two major branches of the philosophy of science: ontology or the theory of what exists for which one might say the counterpart in the SQR label is ‘spatial’; and epistemology or the theory of what counts as knowledge – ‘quantitative’ and all the methodological connotations that went with it is the obvious reference here. On the other hand, the overwhelming sense of the SQR was a prioritization of methods; get your methods right and everything else would follow. What constituted the basic stuff of the geographer’s world – people, nature, society and, yes, space, received far less critical attention. This was unfortunate. Whether one likes it or not assumptions about the nature of the world will creep in because you can’t proceed without them, and it is better to be aware of what assumptions one is making and to subject them to critical scrutiny than not.

Consider the idea here of that crucial component of spatial-quantitative analysis, ‘variables.’ The assumption is that the ‘explanatory variables’ in a multiple regression equation are independent of one another, separate; that in a study of urban home values such ‘variables’ as ‘school district’, ‘distance to CBD’, ‘levels of air pollution’, ‘crime levels’, could not be connected by causal processes of the same nature. In a sense this is true. Air pollution is caused by different activities than are crime levels. But in another sense they are *not* independent of one another. They *are* connected through the same process, become part of it. That process is the one through which people make money out of the development and exchange of real estate. This is a process that thrives on, constructs difference, because it is the way in which the consumers will be attracted to one housing opportunity rather than another. If there weren’t any differences in school district quality, crime levels, or whatever, then real estate developers and realtors would construct other differences so as to give their product a market advantage.

In the pursuit of 'variables' that can be measured and inserted in a regression model, in other words, one divides the world up into mutually exclusive objects and implicitly denies the many ways in which those objects are actually tied together by relationships of a necessary sort. There has been considerable reaction against this in human geography, and the dangers of letting method govern conceptual frameworks and, therefore, concepts of what exists, are more widely recognized. Rather ontology should come first, and we should then choose our methods in accordance with our understanding of the nature of our objects. Accordingly this Module is divided into two parts and ontological considerations, reasonably enough (!) lead off.<sup>1</sup>

Consider, therefore, the fact that there are certain basic concepts that we habitually deal with in geography and which refer to the stuff, the material objects or relationships that we study. These exist at a very high level of abstraction and include: People; Society; Nature; Space; and Time. Before entering into a consideration of these terms we should note the following. First, for human geographers the meanings of these terms, what exactly they refer to, have been the object of quite serious and protracted contestation. This has been far less true of physical geography for reasons which we will touch on later. Second, the objects to which these terms refer don't exist independently of one another. They are what they are in virtue of their relations with one another.

For example:

- People and Society: People are what they are – parents, employees, students – only in consequence of their social relations with other people. Without a process of socialization they would not recognizably be people in that they would not be able to respond to others – e.g. linguistically – in a people-like way.
- People and Nature: Likewise people and nature are not opposed terms; people are part of nature, way stations in various chemical cycles as well as of the hydrological cycle. Nature is a necessary condition for people reproducing themselves from one day to the next. We have to engage with it in order to secure food, water, and shelter. One might add that we also

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<sup>1</sup> For a good, if somewhat dense discussion of these issues, see Andrew Sayer (1979) "Epistemology and Conceptions of People and Nature in Geography." *Geoforum* 10, 19-43.

engage with it in order to secure all those goods necessary to our identity, to our self-respect in a society where people are accorded status according to outward signs of consumption.

- Relations between Space and Time: Relations over space are also relations through time; production time, for example, can be changed by altering spatial relations. The spatial organization of contemporary society is a sharp expression of the importance of time economy; we live close to various places in order to reduce not just the cost of getting there but also the time it takes. Time is labor. Cut the time it takes to get somewhere and you cut the labor cost: compare the old trans-Atlantic liners with their huge retinues of workers with the modern trans-Atlantic jet trip.