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Classics in human geography revisited

Buttimer, A., 1976: Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66, 277–92.

Commentary 1

This article appeared in a classic number of the *Annals*. Some of the best younger talents in the Association of American Geographers were commissioned to show the state of the art of American geography to the 1976 IGU Congress in Moscow. There was no overall theme but one emerged none the less. With articles by Yi-Fu Tuan on humanistic geography, Robert Sack on magic and space, David Ward on the mythology of the Victorian slum and Leslie King on alternatives to positivist economic geography, it amounted to something of a special issue on the philosophical turn of the time in Anglo-American human geography. As a graduate student then at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, I was acutely attuned to this mid-1970s turn to more cultural-humanistic perspectives and the possibilities they offered.

When, recently, at Nottingham, I pulled the issue from the shelves I noted how well used and well worn it was. Anne Buttimer's article in particular bore the pressure of scores of students poring over its text and, like a medieval palimpsest, many marginal comments and annotations, some scholarly, some not. Alongside the quotation that space is a '...lived horizon along which things and persons are perceived and valued' (p. 282) is a exquisitely drawn hand in a two-fingered gesture, whether directed at or from the text (towards some positivist reader) it is difficult to say. It reminded me that in England 1976 was the Year of Punk.

'Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld' was a key text in the moment of humanistic geography, and perhaps the most ambitious. In a proposal to bring intellectual knowledge closer to lived experience, it not only sought to blend phenomenology with existentialism but also to operationalize their philosophical perspectives with the techniques of time-geography. In the course of the article the language of 'dwelling' and 'lived experience' shifts suddenly to one of 'grids', 'paths', 'stations' and 'coupling requirements'. As Cole Harris commented at the time (in his sceptical contribution to the Ley and Samuels, 1978, collection, *Humanistic geography*), here was a humanistic geography grounded not '... in tradition or culture but rather in a society pre-occupied with technique and management'. While the article opens with Heidegger's evocation of a two-century-old Black Forest farmhouse, it closes with the author's anticipation of a new modern order:

Instead of bemoaning the advent of a mobile society and condemning it as pathological... one might envision it as a challenge to develop a new respect for space, time, nature. Instead of forcing all places to provide all the prerequisites for authentic living, one could conceive of a new areal differentiation of the earth (p. 290).

The approving references on the next page to 'yoga, bioenergetics, psychomotor therapies' (then, in 1976, highly alternative practices), make this seem, in its combination of vision and technique, very much a new-age geography.

Influential in its time, 'Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld' has enjoyed little lasting influence in the academy of Anglo-American human geography (it has, I'm told, been more influential in Scandinavia). While there have been a number of geographical studies of ordinary people's everyday experiences and attitudes, few have been explicitly formulated as empirical investigations of a phenomenological 'lifeworld'. The article's very approach to phenomenology as a guiding motivation, and adjunct to empirical science, rather than itself a rigorous method, was severely questioned (notably in John Pickles' book of 1985). Both Buttimer's article and humanistic geography as an intellectual formation have scarcely survived movements in historical materialism, feminism and deconstruction. The article's visionary tone, its technical method, its appeal to universal experience, its emphasis on integration and reconciliation, all look now distinctly unfashionable. But the article resonates, perhaps more so than at the time of its publication, with the concerns of interest groups outside the academy, in areas of education, environmentalism, therapy and design and, given its brief to broaden the horizons of geographical knowledge, this is a sign of success.

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Stephen Daniels

- Ley, D. and Samuels, M.S., editors, 1978: *Humanistic geography: prospects and problems*. Chicago, IL: Maaroufa Press.
- Pickles, J. 1985: *Phenomenology, science and geography: spatiality and the human sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Commentary 2

When I first read Buttimer's 'Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld' I did so from the perspective of a historical geographer concerned about developing an alternative non-positivist philosophical foundation for human geography. Some of these philosophical concerns found expression in my 'An idealist alternative in human geography' (1974), which appeared two years before Buttimer's article. In rereading Buttimer's 'lifeworld' I was again struck by what appeared to be strong similarities between our two positions, but also noted areas of disagreement. The similarities had to do with how people understand themselves and others. The main disagreements focused on Buttimer's evident disaste of the modern world, 'the wasteland', and the supposedly alienating effects of technology on the human condition.

Let me deal with the similarities first. Buttimer noted that individuals are born into '... an intersubjective world, i.e., we learn language and styles of social behavior which enable us to engage in the everyday world ... This intersubjective heritage does not normally have to be questioned unless we move to a different cultural setting'. Such a move could be made in space or time. We could move to a foreign country or go back in time to find our 'foreign country' in the past. Buttimer's 'intersubjective heritage' is also known as history. The distinctive historical experiences of the world's people's account for differences in human behaviour and ways of life. How does one understand other people with different values and cultures? Buttimer answered: 'One needs not only to recognize, but to translate, the signs and symbols of the other group, and to grasp empathetically the

motivational meanings of their actions.' Attached to this sentence is a long footnote with a discussion of the concept of *verstehen* as elaborated by Max Weber. She concluded: 'Weber did try to unmask the subjective component of action, but he did not proceed phenomenologically; he did not examine the tacit assumptions underlying his theoretical or methodological stance.' Presumably this shortcoming is sufficiently serious to render Weber's *verstehen* inadequate in Buttimer's eyes.

Yet a version of *verstehen* or rethinking that seems entirely compatible with a good part of Buttimer's agenda was presented by the philosopher-historian R.G. Collingwood (1946). Collingwood is a figure of importance in philosophy, but he has not received the kind of recognition from geographers that he has received elsewhere. The eminent philosopher, A.J. Ayer, for example, considered Collingwood's philosophical ideas sufficiently important to merit a full chapter in his nine-chapter *Philosophy in the twentieth century* (1982). Collingwood developed the notion that an action had an inside and an outside. The outside of an action had to do with physical bodies and their thought-invoked movements. The inside of an action was thought. The actions of historical agents could only be understood by rethinking their thoughts. Such rethinking required a scholar to uncover what the world meant to the peoples being investigated. The dynamism of a lifeworld is the historical creation of human thought and expresses a people's ongoing struggle to find meaning in life. The Collingwoodian view gives full attention to the vitality of human emotions, but insists that lifeworlds incorporate human understandings of phenomena and must be understood as creations of the historical mind.

Buttimer emphasized that much of what people think is taken for granted and is not part of their conscious thought. Collingwood dealt with this issue in a historical context, referring to the presuppositions incorporated into a society's ways of thinking. The scholar is able to recreate imaginatively the intellectual milieu of different societies and make connections between thought and action. The question of meaning is a question of how people construct themselves in the world. The categories and theories imposed on the world by conscious minds give meaning to specific situations. If we cannot understand the thought people bring to living their lives we cannot really understand their actions at all.

There are clearly differences of emphasis in the attempts geographers have made to find a more humanistic foundation for human geography. Buttimer showed that a phenomenological emphasis provides the basis for the rigorous description of experience. Yet if the objective of understanding is to address the dynamism of lifeworlds one is clearly concerned with change. How do peoples generate and accommodate to change? How do distinctive ways of life come into existence and how are they transformed and replaced by new ones? If one is to deal with the dynamics of change, a philosophy that takes history seriously is needed. History provides the motor that drives the change that creates distinctive peoples and societies. In this endeavour it would appear that a philosophy of history in Collingwoodian tradition would serve the interests of scholars concerned to understand how peoples have related to each other and their physical worlds more effectively than philosophies less concerned with history and change.

The adoption of a reflective critical historical approach would also enable the geographer to deal with change without romanticizing or condemning it. Buttimer provides her own subjective opinions when she referred to today's environment as 'the wasteland' and assumed that modern technology alienated people from their environments. The goal of analysis should be to understand how people themselves understood their own situations. There may certainly be people who feel alienated from their environments and the reasons for such alienation would provide a topic for geographical investigation. The scholar needs

to be careful to base conclusions on a critical evaluation of evidence and not to assume other people will assess situations in a similar way to the investigator.

There is a secure place in human geography for the rigorous description of experience along the lines suggested by phenomenology – in Buttimer's words, '... a philosophical mode of reflection on conscious experience, and an attempt to explain this in terms of meaning and significance'. This approach would appear less well suited to understanding human ways of life as historical creations. To grasp the dynamism of lifeworlds requires the scholar to grasp the thought expressed in human activity. Such thought needs to be reconstructed and critically rethought in its historical context. Historical understanding of this type would seem to provide a stronger basis for achieving the principal objectives that Buttimer would have us address through phenomenology.

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Leonard Guelke

Ayer, A.J. 1982: *Philosophy in the twentieth century*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Collingwood, R.G. 1946: *The idea of history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guelke, L. 1974: An idealist alternative in human geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64, 193–202. Restated and amplified in Guelke, L. 1982: *Historical understanding in geography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Author's response

*Take care Owen, said Hugh, to remember everything is a form of madness . . .
My friend, confusion is not an ignoble condition (Brian Friel, Translations).*

To be reminded of an article penned virtually 20 years ago evokes mixed emotions: delight that it has become a 'classic', and still a certain bewilderment, as when confronted with a photograph from the family album. Not that 'lifeworld' has ever been far from memory. Correspondence based on its French, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish versions still flows and major advances have been made over the years in experimentally grounded approaches within the practice of geography in many corners of the world. Comments by Leonard Guelke and Stephen Daniels reiterate the confusion which Anglo-American scholars have often expressed over 'continental' philosophy. They also illustrate how much the ebb and tide of enthusiasm for different vogues in geography mirror the changing contexts in which the discipline is practised. To reply is to indulge in some remembering of the early 1970s and the questions which then filled the air.

The Graduate School of Geography at Clark University was a good place to be in those years (Buttimer, 1987). With energetic graduate students, colleagues and occasional visitors, there was lively debate across disciplinary lines on space, time and environmental experience; an ideal setting for critical reflection on taken for granted values and ways of life. The invitation from the Association of American Geographers to write on *Values in geography* (1974) was the catalyst for a critical rereading of texts in phenomenology and existentialism which I had first encountered at Louvain a decade earlier. I grappled then, as I still do, with the tensions between two directions of inquiry: empirically oriented study of social space and perception on the one hand, reflection on the history and philosophy of science on the other. The lifeworld article tried first to discern common threads between

phenomenology and existentialism, and then to find lessons from both for the practice of geography.

'Writing,' Bourdieu (1977: 156) remarked, 'tears practice and discourse out of the flow of time.' It should thus be no surprise that both comments point towards the evidence of ambivalence in the lifeworld article: tensions between subjective and objective, analytical and reflective, approaches to knowledge, apparently contradictory attitudes towards modernity, and the proposed rapprochement of phenomenology and time-geography. In retrospect it seems that those very tensions might have been in part responsible for the creativity which was definitely apparent at Clark during those years.

Leonard Guelke resents the neglect of Collingwood and apparent dismissal of Weber's approach to *verstehen*. The idealist alternative, he claims, which 'requires the scholar to grasp the *thought* expressed in human activity', makes more sense for the historical geographer. *Chacun à son goût!* If all activity could be linked directly to thought, i.e., the cognitive dimensions of consciousness, there would be little room for argument. But phenomenology seeks to unmask other aspects of habitual consciousness embedded in emotional, moral, aesthetic and corporeal experience which are not generally reflected upon in everyday life. In its emphasis on intentionality, phenomenology does suggest common ground with idealism, and indeed some Anglo-American writers still regard them as virtually identical. The *explicanda* of phenomenology, however, extend beyond individual human consciousness; they even include a radical critique of the anthropocentrism in conventional scientific models (Bachelard, 1964; Schwenk, 1976). The horizon outlined in 'lifeworld' was one which could transcend the duality of subject and object, and one which acknowledged the reciprocity of analytical and reflective movements in thought and practice.

Stephen Daniels muses on the so-called 'humanistic turn' in Anglo-American geography which, like a *Brideshead revisited*, evokes some nostalgia. Too bad it simply seems to be no longer in fashion, eclipsed by movements in historical materialism, feminism and deconstruction! The lifeworld article did open doors to domains of interest *outside the academy*, he concedes. Surely those who have explored phenomenological perspectives in their research endeavours have found a warmer welcome in fields such as architecture, medicine and environmentally sustainable development, than they have among colleagues in geography. Good evidence for enthusiasts of sociological interpretations of the history of science, but surely a question mark for the gatekeepers of disciplinary orthodoxy and fashion? But the lifeworld article, Daniels claims, showed some confusion about the proper nature of phenomenology's 'rigorous method', and the suggestion of a *va-et-vient* with empirical science was, in his opinion, both naive and unnecessary.

A central dilemma raised in both commentaries, as indeed by Ted Relph already in 1976, was the juxtaposition of two different languages: that of lived experience and dwelling on the one hand, those of time-geography on the other. This is a direct reflection, *à la* Bourdieu, of my own hopes in 1976, of engaging in a dialogue with Torsten Hägerstrand and his Swedish colleagues. When the article was published I was in Lund, engaged in a four-month seminar on 'Nature, space and time: knowledge and experience' with a group of colleagues from 15 different disciplines. It was a field-testing, as it were, of the challenges expressed in the lifeworld article.

That seminar was indeed a marvellous event. The sharing of critical reflections on taken for granted ideas and practices led to lively exchange across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. As elsewhere throughout continental European geography at the time, the mood favoured dialectical approaches and the tendency to polarize contrasts, e.g., between

subjective and objective, managerial and client interests, scientific and official views on space and planning, qualitative and quantitative approaches to knowledge and understanding. What emerged, however, was a more hermeneutic stance, a puzzle of interpretations. The object of the exercise was critical self-understanding as a prelude to world understanding. And unlike conventional scientific knowledge, communicable via prose, equations or maps, understanding involves discovery, or rediscovery, by each individual. The juxtaposition of these two languages – those of lived experience and dwelling and those of time-geography – provided a good catalyst for richer insight on the human experience of nature, space and time. It continues to serve in highlighting theoretical ‘fissures’ between different worlds of discourse (Harvey, 1990: 201–25).

To highlight these tensions, and their implications of landscape and life, was the central aim of ‘lifeworld’ and the Lund 1976 seminar. In the parlance of the 1990s the discussions might now well qualify as musings on ‘the condition of postmodernity’. No longer in fashion? If they were, perhaps one would really need to worry. Critical reflections on taken for granted ways and orthodoxies should be a *sine qua non* for every scholar. To isolate such practice from the general thrust of analytical endeavour is to fossilize it, or force it, Narcissus-like, into the pool of Hippocrene.

Ample journal space has been allocated to describing the limitations of inherited scientific conventions and their collusion with international interests of capital in the practice of geography within western (imperial) schools of geography. In their own early twentieth-century contexts the original phenomenologists dreamt about an emancipation of thought from the orthodoxies inscribed in institutional structures and material circumstances which had apparently been so influential in the shaping of mindscapes. What is needed now is a fresh vision which encourages *ecumenical* approaches to knowledge and understanding of how humanity as a whole is dealing with its terrestrial habitat: *GAIA-graphem* of diverse lifeworlds. To remember strands in geographic thought and practice might indeed be a kind of madness; confusing geographical thought with the fleeting fashions of disciplinary orthodoxy might no longer be translatable as an ignoble condition.

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