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Environmental Perception and Behavior: An Inventory and Prospect

Editors
Thomas F. Saarinen, David Seamon, and James L. Sell

1983
The invitation to comment on these papers offers a welcome challenge. Many people here remember the enthusiasm and pioneering spirit of that session on "Environmental Perception and Behavior" at Columbus in 1965. It was my first experience of a national meeting of the Association of American Geographers and I distinctly remember how thrilling it was to find senior members of the profession on a wavelength similar to the one I had come to in my own dissertation work on French geography. There was a puzzle on my mind that day, but I was far too timid to raise it publicly: why, way back in the 1930s, was Hardy’s initiative in La géographie psychologique so harshly squelched? In this land of boundless opportunity, I told myself, maybe the idea will be judged on its own merits.

Since 1965, a great variety of perspective and style has come to characterize research on environmental perception and behavior in America. Opportunity, of course, is socially contingent, and our perceptions of success or failure are also filtered through cultural lenses. Perhaps the most helpful comment I can offer is an invitation to reflect on the “dream and reality” of the past fifteen years, to look at some of the key philosophical differences among stances articulated in this session, and to speculate on potential common denominators and sources of conflict among them. My own perception are no doubt colored by continuing curiosity over the social construction of thought and practice and wishful thinking about dialogue among diverse stances where the integrity of each is respected.

Let me begin my complimenting David Seamon for arranging this session which juxtaposes at least some of the starkest contrasts in style of commitment and research which have come to populate this general field. I suspect that it is from the passion and conviction of...
evident in the expression of each stance, and the animosities evident among them, that the most valuable lessons are to be gleaned. Seamon’s introductory paper sets these contrasts in the framework suggested by Gregory for a revitalized human geography; one is invited to develop structural, reflexive, and committed modes of practice. Whether these approaches can be orchestrated or even practised simultaneously may well depend on how adequately we understand the diverse currents of philosophical direction in their own right.

It seems to me that there are at least four distinct schools of thought implicit or explicit in the papers: positivism, Marxism, structuralism, and phenomenology. Each of these perspectives was initially imported from continental Europe to the Anglo-American world, and today’s articulation of each no doubt reflects the vicissitudes of the migration and adaptation experience. To understand the roots of these incompatibilities which have been expressed today, or indeed to assess the value of each for the elucidation of environmental perception and behavior, one might well consider the drama of host and guest thought styles in their selective migrations and repatriations across the English Channel and the Atlantic. What is welcomed in the culture, art, cuisine and thought of migrants is that for which the host has already cultivated an appetite; by corollary, the “unheard of” may be misconstrued, rejected, or repressively tolerated, unless there is openness for something entirely new to develop. The style and content of our references to these various “-isms” and “-ologies” today, then, may tell us quite as much about ourselves as it does about the fundamental philosophies themselves.

I use the expression “Anglo-American” deliberately: over half the participants in today’s session come with backgrounds in British education and have spent the bulk of their professional careers in a North American context. One recalls that in the pioneering panel there were mostly Americans, nor indeed was there any mention of the Vienna Circle, Marx, Levi-Strauss or Husserl. It is good to have one of those pioneers, Joseph Sonnenfeld, present today, not only to refresh our minds on how the original challenge was perceived, but to let us see what endures of the initial ethos and style of approaching it. The geographers, coming from cultural-historical and man-land traditions, seemed excited over the prospects offered by conceptual and analytical developments in psychology; the psychologists, coming from psycho-analytic and empiricist traditions, seemed excited about the prospects of considering “spatial” or “environmental” dimensions in their own work.

As these new techniques and ideas were absorbed within geography, the old bifurcation of spatial and man-made traditions reasserted itself; the former, by and large, espousing a behavioral orientation, the latter an ecological one. Ambivalence also grew between those whose primary curiosity was about processes of perception and cognition, and those who were primarily interested in patterns of behavior. What receded from view over the years was that initial goal of seeing connections between the two, e.g., in the context of historical patterns like attitudes toward nature, settlement of the Great Plains, or of problem-solving and policy on flood plain management. From the geographer’s perspective, what has been produced may seem like a fragmented array of special insights into particular aspects of human perception and behavior rather than more complete or explanatory descriptions of landscapes.

Such, of course, has been the record in the whole Western tradition, especially in geography, where the values of empirical inquiry via the “case study” approach have held high esteem. In fact, to have outlined a rational framework in which the special contribution of each specific research line would have been assigned a place a priori might have wreaked of imperialism and intellectual autocracy—‘âtes noires to the empirical mind. However ecumenical and enterprising were the clarion calls of the pioneers, they probably did not pay serious attention to those deeper epistemological issues which, given the nature of the field, were almost inevitably to arise.

Each of the four major philosophies referred to in today’s session could be regarded as having addressed forgotten dimensions of that initial challenge. A popular impression is that positivism has addressed issues of methodological rigor and the verification of statements; that Marxism has pointed to the social interests served by conventional thought and practice; that structuralism has sought

to undermine the myth of human subjects as agents of consciousness and action; and that phenomenology has made people aware of their a priori lenses, suggesting that they be placed in parentheses, so that reality could speak for itself. All four perspectives begin with a distinct set of assumptions about the nature of being and thought; each, too, bears the stamp of the period and place in which it was first articulated and developed. Transposed to other contexts, to periods and places with different challenges and engrained habits of thought, there are inevitable losses and gains in meaning, inevitable misunderstandings and difficulties in communication. The credibility of their distinct claims to truth can scarcely be understood unless there is an appreciation of the contexts to which they addressed themselves initially, and the circumstances surrounding their transposition from one context to another.

I do not refer simply to the question of translations from German and French, or the purely linguistic aspects of transposing ideas from continental regionalism to Anglo-American empiricism. For more significant, it seems to me, are issues of cultural value within host and guest worlds, e.g., assumptions about the nature of reality, the role of scholars in society, and the relations between academic research and problem-solving. As Wittgenstein and others have shown, focus on "translations" may lead one to a thoroughly relativistic position, e.g., "it's all in the game of language," or "it depends on how you define x or y." In other words, the possibility of reaching common denominators of semantics, let alone logic, or the prospects of debate or dialogue among these four schools today, are seriously diminished if the contextually defined values of each perspective are not acknowledged. This holds not only for schools of thought but also perhaps for our own individual contributions as well.

Let me illustrate from my own experience. When I returned to the United States in 1970 after some exploration into the everyday worlds of relocated Glasgow families, I was given to understand that if the notion of "social space" was ever to become acceptable, I should develop a mode of operationalizing it, viz., develop a reliable instrument to test the idea and then deliver some useful results, for example, in housing policy. The values of my "host" context, thus, were those of analytical acuity and rigor on the one hand, and of practical usefulness on the other. Now, I was in an existential mood at the time and such technical or pragmatic concerns, however exciting or challenging, could only become meaningful if they could be harmonized with a particular value system. Research "objects" would have to be regarded as "subjects"; the researcher would ideally become a facilitator of heightened awareness among those subjects and also encourage them to assume more discretion and responsibility over their own life situations. There were, in other words, "value" questions intruding all the time on conversations and debates about environmental perception and behavior which could not be handled simply by translations of x's and y's.

No doubt each of today's panelists has had similar experiences of such conversations where people seem to be talking past each other. As long as the other is perceived in the categories of one's own current "ism", is it possible to really hear what that other person is saying? The Anglo-American penchant for giving greater credence to ideas which can be operationalized analytically and can yield practical solutions to problems may be one of the reasons why there is such confusion and misunderstanding among these four schools of thought. Each of them addresses a distinct constellation of intellectual and practical curiosities and bears a distinct image of the world; to judge the validity of one perspective in the categories of another may lead to a kind of "blindman's buff" rather than an exercise in scholarly communication.

Positivism, it is generally felt, had the easiest crossing from Europe to America. It came already mature and well equipped to negotiate with and build on the predominant values of its host world. It proclaimed verifiability of statement and horizons of scientific status for geography on the one hand, as well as prospects for theoretically-grounded contributions to policy-making on the other. For geographers and psychologists in the postwar era, what more welcome news was conceivable for those who had played hero in the defense of freedom and rationality? One can understand the anger aroused by any subsequent migrant perspective which would challenge the hegemony of positivism, especially if the foundations of that perspective were not immediately translatable into technical and pragmatic terms.

But what if one had not experienced World War II or those threats to human freedom so starkly dramatized in the thirties? What if, at another time and place, the problems of poverty, prejudice, alienation, and social injustice seemed more pressing? One
might have become more concerned about changing the world rather than theorizing about it, as Marx was; more concerned about praxis than with thought. Or, if in the doldrums of the twentieth century, one became more concerned with the quality of life experience rather than the quantity of goods or the "rationality" of things, then issues of personal authenticity and integrity might become interesting, as they were for existentialists. And apart from social relevance altogether, if one's central concerns were epistemological, e.g., clearing the ground for the exercise of the Pure Reason in an era of "isms" and "ologies," then the radicalism of zu den sachen might hold appeal.

The paper by Golledge and Couclelis extols the virtues of positivism in "setting standards of clarity, consistency, and rigor in the development of argument and conduct of inquiry which are unparalleled in the history of human thought." Acknowledging the varieties of orientation associated with the field, the authors nevertheless identify its primary feature, viz., the analytical method. Then, dismissing one by one most of those tenets which have appeared objectionable or 'unnecessary', they wind up in a position which resembles quite closely American pragmatism. Not only is positivism now to be defined in terms of what positivists do, but "few, if any of the classic positivist tenets now seem to be necessary." What remains after the purge is the sine qua non of reductionism in method, and also a set of beliefs and preferences about the nature of reality which fits neatly into the American Dream. There is no place here for the poorly trained, the heart not within, or the dilettante. The grounds on which the other three schools are dismissed also stem from aesthetic and moral principles. Marxism is unwelcome because it does not acknowledge "human beings as the primary and most important reality"; structuralism threatens to make the field "social at the cost of ceasing to be human"; and phenomenology is seen as being concerned with "disembodied consciousness hovering over a world of thought and feelings" and "perpetuating the alienating and unnecessary dichotomy between body and soul." The authors' perception of these three schools and the criteria on which they are to be judged reflect cultural values and ideological choices quite as much as their avowed epistemological commitments.

I'm not sure all positivists would be so flexible, but suppose one does take the option outlined here. One still has to confront the issue of whether the epistemological claims of positivism are
general theories, laws, and verifiable statements about environmental perception and behavior? Pragmatists claim a contextual explanation of discrete events, and, in varieties of radical empiricism, no claims to scientific law or perennial truth are forwarded: "The truth is only that expedient in the way of our thinking... we have to live today by what truth we get today and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood." As I understand it, a pragmatist would take each event in terms of its own coordinates of reference in time, space and movement; contingency, spontaneity and unpredictability are cherished values. Now that seems a far cry from the positivist search for general laws about time, space, and behavior. I wonder, therefore, how Golledge and Couclelis reconcile these apparently countervailing claims of pragmatism and positivism when it comes to future development in environmental perception and behavior.

Detective stories can compete any day with good operational models. The title of Douglas Greenberg's paper already launches his theme in an American idiom. In fact, nothing in his preface should raise anybody's suspicions until that cryptic citation from Marx: "we make our own history, but not of our own free will." One senses that there is more implied here than qualifications about bounded rationality or the resiliency of the analytical method—that something beyond the limits of alleged freedom and dignity holds the key to explaining behavior. Human beings are not to lose their primacy; rather it is "conscious human agency" that gets de-centered. Ontologically speaking, it is capital which "must be treated as the directive force propelling history within societies like our own."

There are no doubt many brands of Marxism and structuralism, many reinterpretations of Das Kapital and Tristes Tropiques. It is a brave challenge to bridge the gulf between these two fundamentally contrasting schools of thought. Althusser, Thompson, Giddens and Greenberg notwithstanding, I think the contrast is a more fundamental one and the differences less reconcilable than is acknowledged in Greenberg's paper. Nor do I think one can fully appreciate the whole agency-structure debate without considering the context of France in the 1960s, the non-events of May 1968, and the

10. The actual text paraphrased here (R. C. Tucker, The Marx-Engels Reader (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972[1967]) makes a slightly less demanding assertion: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they are not lords of their own conditions."
nausea and anger generated afterwards among those who sought to launch a truly revolutionary movement. Anglo commentary on the nouveaux philosophes often misses the point about emotional aspects of this literature. The passionate search for alternatives to those idealistic rhetorics of pre-1968 (socialism, Maoism, existentialism and Marxism) was motivated to a large extent by the disillusionment about the "dream and reality" of liberation from structures rather than cool dispassionate reworking of epistemology. Was it not the liberation rather than the definition of man that Marx set as goal when he placed praxis instead of consciousness at the heart of his efforts—sentient—imbued praxis anchored in the everyday realities of work and social interaction? In this vein, there was a wide arena for potential interaction with existentialists and others who had read Hegel and appreciated the values of dialectical reasoning. Althusser claims that somewhere between 1845 and 1848, there was an epistemological turn in Marx: his earlier notion of praxis (which in his view still smacked of German idealism) was subordinated to a more scientific theory of history based on distinctions between structure and exchange relations. Thus, he sought to reconcile Marxism and structuralism—a tour de force, indeed—for structuralism, in its genesis and raison d'être, had set out to erase history, to dispel the myths of human subjectivity, and to replace concern about human agency with observations into an anonymous archipelago of structures. For Levi-Strauss, one of the key founders of structuralism, the issue was "not to constitute but to dissolve man," to eliminate "particular, finite, historical subjectivity." Mind, of course, could survive, but this was a kind of trans-historical objective mind, "unconcerned with the identity of its occasional bearers."

In eliminating concern about diachronic movements in social history, then, and in focusing on the invariant grammars of objective mind, structuralists are evidently prepared to lose touch with the concrete realities and spontaneous accidents of lived experience. In contrast, Marxists are concerned deeply about those concrete actions and interactions of people in history. However, if all history and, in fact, all human science is "ideology" as Marxists also claim, how can there be a scientific study of environmental perception? Strictly speaking, they should regard the kind of research which we have been pursuing over the past fifteen years as serving the false consciousness which permeates bourgeois ideas and techniques. One wonders how and where, then, is it possible to find some standpoint of inquiry from which to purify our own consciousness of its falsity? Does a refuge in structures or structuration processes provide a solution, or does this lead to another as yet unexploited form of determinism?

The real struggle, it seems to me, is between structure and praxis. And, again, it is not always on the logics of respective procedures, or the analytical sharpness of research techniques or claims to truth that these schools of thought are propounded or confounded. As with other perspectives, Marxism and structuralism have been evaluated according to the aesthetic, moral, and practical challenges of particular contexts. Thompson's critique of Althusser, in Greenberg's reading, seems to have been a bold attempt to keep the frontier spirit alive—human agency must remain an essential assumption—and, incidentally, to take out a claim for sociology and social history in the debate. Giddens tries to give structuralism a more dynamic flavor, to reach further in the direction of time and space analysis but to save those precious cultural values of enterprise, ingenuity, and theoretically-grounded formulae for action.

Greenberg is enthusiastic about the suggestion that structures be regarded as "enabling" as well as "constraining," i.e., that one looks at structuration processes and "situated practices." It strikes me that there may be an analogy here with the turn toward transactional analysis which researchers in environmental perception took a few years ago in order to transcend the ideological impasse between "behaviorists" and "intentionalists." In other words, one again seeks refuge in a "process" orientation: the primary explicanda are not the geometry and architecture of structures and forms (be they images, classes, institutions or regions); rather they are the dynamics of systems within which behavior is situated. If my hunch is correct, then what has been accomplished with the "structuring" proposal is a possible solution to the methodological problem, a shift from a correspondence to an operational one on of with. What remains unresolved, as in
still left in parentheses, are those ontological issues on which the paper began, such as free will and determinism.

Edward Ralph's paper moves to a different wavelength. Rather than arguing over conceptualizations, he tells a story about his own tastes and preferences and elaborates on the complex task of landscape description. In his skepticism over theories and abstractions, he, too, echoes William James and the radical empiricism of early American philosophy. And from here he shows a kinship of spirit with Ruskin and Turner, Goethe and Beethoven, eventually incorporating some of Heidegger's reflections on thought and being. Ralph first de-centers the strictly cognitive questions and then returns to them after an excursion into feeling and seeing.

In style and content this paper is deliberately provocative. All forms of explanation, particularly that of the "behaviorists," are lumped together under the label of potential manipulators; social scientists are either naive or pharisaical. The only worthwhile issue is the researcher's own mode of perception and behavior. For those who have come to cherish "clarity of argument" and "inter-subjectively negotiated categories of discourse," this style is no doubt more than a puzzle: chasms of language and ideology yawn between this paper and the preceding two. If Ralph's intention was to shock, then he has probably succeeded. However, given the context, one in which action speaks louder than words, one in which phenomenology and existentialism are to be defined in terms of what its practitioners do, this style may run the risk of misunderstanding and closing doors on further conversation. Ralph, of course, decry's all labels, but readers and readers may be unwilling to refrain from labelling. For other students who have seriously tried to understand these schools of thought and to harvest some insight from them on questions of environmental perception and behavior, Ralph's paper may be offensive. It could reinforce those stereotypical perceptions which already besadden the prospects of communication and mutual understanding. His paper could well be construed as reinforcing the mythology of Snow's Two Cultures; his argument is uncompromising on the possibility of any general knowledge at all and ultimately pessimistic about progress in science.

What struck me most in Ralph's paper was the manner in which it dramatized that whole "deconstruction" ethos of modernist thought since Wittgenstein—a moment which has sought to dismantle successively traditional foundations of knowledge—and to move from epistemology to hermeneutics. The hermeneutical challenge implicit here—the prospect of really being able to read the texts of landscape—does seem to hold promise not only in answering geography's need to become aware of reflexivity, but also in contributing to the elucidation of some dilemmas in modern philosophy. After all, when scientists and humanists come together, what does a geographer have to bring to the meeting? One contribution is surely explication of landscape—reading the face of the earth as the texts in which civilizations have inscribed their ongoing dreams and realities. Zu den zachen is even more a radical challenge than Ralph or Seamon suggest in their papers, for it points to horizons which must remain, by definition, unattainable via human language, viz., letting the things speak for themselves. To the pragmatist's retort, "show me how it works," a phenomenologist might say, "try it yourself." For "working" phenomenologically is essentially the practice of époché—the placing in parentheses of one's taken-for-granted habits of thought and practice. How this approach is to yield fruit "operationally" is still up to the individual thinker.

Words, symbols, language—communicating insight and experience—remain the central dilemma among our various schools of thought on environmental perception and behavior. Ralph has personified the individual's stance on the challenge, and Seamon in his paper attempts to identify areas of research in which the phenomenological perspective may be applied. Illustrating these realities in metaphors of landscape painting, classical music, or agrarian dwelling may, however, imply unwillingness to work on the agenda seen as most urgent by the pragmatist, Marxist, or positivist. Is it really possible to let the things around us—the lego landscapes, the interchangeable components of environments and places, the neon-speckled panoramas through which the urban commuter moves—speak for themselves? If one illustrates the phenomenological perspective only with examples from rustif harmony and agrarian dwelling, may one suspect that the époché has not really been accomplished—that the author's own aesthetic and ideological preferences may still impose a selective filtering on the "things themselves?" Grady Clay has made some strides with the use of ordinary language, inventing phrases and works to capture
features of urban landscapes, and Norberg-Schulz has attempted to
discern connections between existential and architectural spaces. 18
How do such endeavors relate to those urgent concerns of the
pragmatist, Marxist and positivist? Hassan Fathy's architecture may
make marvelous sense phenomenologically but evidently not
politically. 19 Could it be that one has to consider the
possibilities of film, music, art and sculpture—even imaginative
mapping—as more appropriate media through which landscape realities
may speak for themselves?

To bring such phenomenological possibilities to harvest,
however, one must confront another vital issue: whether individual
insight and personal readings of landscapes remain idiosyncratic, or
whether a sharing of interpretations is eventually possible. The
epistemological challenge translates automatically into a social
one. Ralph sees no problem here, but I suspect that Seamon does.
The printed word of this proceedings volume may parade
constellations of fascinating monologue but may never lead to
mutually enriching dialogue. It is far easier to spell out
contrasts among the four traditions above than it is to find
potentially common threads among them. The only inkling of common
ground seems to be an implicit reverence for the values of
pragmatism and the American Dream—not too different from the values
evident in the pioneering panel of 1965. The corollary to e
pluribus unum would, I presume, be a need for democracy of effort
with all the checks and balances thereby implied. The operational
formula, however, may be the necessary but not sufficient condition
for an agora or kolonies of research effort on environmental
perception and behavior.

Whatever the difficulties and potential obstacles, it is
indeed heartening to witness the public articulation of views which
were virtually unheard of a generation ago. One hopes that such
ventilation leads to more than tokenism, and that the juxtaposed
profiles may move into a dance of diverse and mutually stimulating
participants. The criteria on which directions for future research
are to be discerned today can no longer be simply those of technical
ingenuity and policy relevance; assumptions about science and
practice can no longer remain unexamined. Doors between disciplines
other than psychology have opened wide, and academic interaction
across the Channel and Atlantic seems to have quickened. Few

18. Greedy Clay, Close-up: How to Read the American City (New York:
Hanser, 1971); Christian Norberg-Schulz, Geddes: Loc.