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Discussing imaginative geographies: Derek Gregory on representation, modernity and space^{*}

edited by MICHAEL HOYLER

Geographical representations¹

Over the last years there seems to have emerged a prominent discourse in Anglo-American geographical inquiry that emphasises not so much the analysis of material culture, but the need for a greater sensitivity towards the power of geographical representations in literature, art, politics. How have these questions gained their disciplinary importance and where do you see the specific value of this approach? Could you perhaps illustrate some ways in which such representations are constructed and used?

Derek Gregory: One obvious example with which most of you will be familiar, is the work that was done in the United States and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s on mental maps. For ten years or more a great deal of research went into the construction of mental maps and much of this research was very sophisticated indeed. Particular groups in the population were identified and asked to draw mental maps of

^{*} This documentation presents some of Derek Gregory's spontaneous responses in the lively discussions during four seminars with graduate students accompanying the first Hettner-Lecture at the University of Heidelberg in June 1997. The excerpts printed here touch on many of the current Anglo-American debates that differ substantially from prominent geographical discourses within German-speaking academia. Expressed here in an easily accessible style, Derek Gregory's inspiring ideas might be read as a stimulus for renewed reflection on our own geographical imaginations.

The seminars were moderated by Tim Freytag and Michael Hoyler. Throughout, Henning Bantien and Burkhard Remppis assisted the memory of all participants by making their voices visible on the library walls of the *Villa Bosch*. Special thanks are due to Katharine Reynolds, who committed herself to the difficult task of transcribing speech from hissing tapes, converting transient phonic into space-bound graphic substance. The edited text follows the transcript. I have, however, rephrased the questions put to Derek Gregory and reproduced all seminar discussions in a condensed and less dialogic style.

Readers who would like to delve into the issues discussed will find topical starting points in Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory (eds.) *Reading human geography: the poetics and politics of inquiry* (London: Arnold, 1997). See also two other recent anthologies: Stephen Daniels and Roger Lee (eds.) *Exploring human geography: a reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), John Agnew, David N. Livingstone and Alisdair Rogers (eds.) *Human geography: an essential anthology* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

¹ *Villa Bosch*, Tuesday, 24th June 1997, 14.30 to 18.00. The discussion started with an exercise in iconographic interpretation – analysing representations of Heidelberg on picture postcards (Renaissance order, Romantic landscape, contemporary tourist gaze, mental map).

their cities, so there were those famous illustrations of middle class groups in Los Angeles – what would they draw on their mental maps? And then the homeless and the down-and-out in Los Angeles, what would they put on their mental maps? This went on for ten years or more, until somebody asked whether people ever *used* mental maps. It was then discovered that the reason people drew mental maps was that they were *asked* to do so by researchers. They were given a piece of paper and a pen and asked, could you just draw a map of ...? But it turns out that most of us, when we find our way around a city, do not start out with a kind of mental atlas and turn over the pages in our heads and there is the plan of Stuttgart or Munich or Heidelberg, and move our way around it. In practice, the way in which we move through cities is much more tactical: we haven't planned a detailed route in advance, but we go along the street and when we see the church it's like a cue in a stage play and at that point we turn right. And we very rarely recover the city as a coherent totality, as a mental map, that's not how we *use* our representations. So it seems to me that the question of how these representations come to be, why some are validated and reproduced again and again and again is not separate from the uses to which they are put. It's not easy to conduct that kind of analysis, I think, for a number of reasons. In very many cases we do what we think we *ought* to do, so we are following a series of norms and conventions, which in a sense validate the experience and validate the knowledge, but which are themselves rarely examined: by convention, our conventions are left alone, unremarked and unanalysed.

This morning walking back from reception in the old Aula to my hotel, I encountered a large party of Japanese tourists walking towards me. What was astonishing was that nobody was looking where they were going. But they all held camcorders, video cameras, and they were walking through the streets of Heidelberg looking at it through a viewfinder [...]. Another example: if you visit the University of Oxford, they market something called the 'Oxford Experience'. Tourists come to Oxford and presumably Heidelberg, and want to know, where is the university? Well, in Oxford that's an impossible question to answer, it's a kind of virtual reality, it doesn't exist as a single entity: there are individual colleges but the university is a concept rather than a site. So the 'Oxford Experience' *constructs* a site, and you can go there and explore through the exhibition Oxford's past and present, and see plans and paintings and photographs. I have been in Oxford and I have watched buses stop, tourists get out, go into this exhibition, spend an hour or so there, get back on the bus and drive on to Bath [...]. The knowledge that people have of Oxford in an experience like this is, again, almost entirely visual. But it is a very particular, focused and directed experience. Framing the world in ways like these has become acceptable, even commonplace at the end of the 20th century; it doesn't seem strange to go to a place and not actually see it, because you can go into an exhibition and see it. In some respects these sights through a viewfinder or staged at an exhibition might even seem

more ‘authentic’ than the places being represented – ‘authenticity’ is then an effect produced by the *organisation* of the view, its claims to completeness, transparency and even legitimacy.

Representation, then, is always a struggle – a conditional achievement – and those conditions (and consequences) mean that representation is always implicated in the play of *power*. Within our discipline, I think that we’ve spent rather too much time over the last 20 years worrying about analysis – which *is* difficult and important – and forgetting just how difficult and just how important representation is. To be sure, you cannot separate them very easily – theories are, after all, a way of imaginatively re-presenting the world, exhibiting it in a different light – but I think that we have invested a great deal of effort into the formal construction of theories and models and techniques, and we haven’t invested enough time in what seems to me to be so cripplingly difficult: description. When I taught first-year students at Cambridge, they found writing their first essay comparatively simple, because it was an exercise in analysis, and they were used to that and knew what conventions to follow. They found writing their first letter home, describing that strange city and what was happening to them, much more difficult. Description seems to me to be an essential part of what we ought to be doing, and if geography is to remain intellectually alive as a discipline and not to go the way of many of the other social sciences in the English-speaking world, it has to recover that ability to describe places, not according to some formula, some sort of master techniques that we can all learn – I think of those dreadful regional monographs all of which were organised in the same way, in the same sequence, with the same chapter headings – if that was a sensible way of knowing the world then all novels would be written the same way, in the same sequence. It’s important politically, it’s important morally, it’s important intellectually and it’s important just to make sure that what we do is *interesting* – to engage the attentions and the emotions of our audience – to be able to describe the places, the people, the landscapes that we are talking about and to have those descriptions called to account. And that means we really do need to think about questions of representation and how they are constructed in writing, in images, in music and elsewhere.

This sort of a discussion is at last under way, but I suspect that many of us are much more comfortable about treating representation as a purely technical matter. So we talk about map reading as a technical exercise – which way is north, how to read the contour lines, how to give a grid reference. But it’s much harder to talk about map reading as a *cultural* exercise: why are these things on the map and not these? What assumptions are smuggled onto maps under the sign of a disinterested ‘Science’? We use photographs very often as decorations in books, but we don’t talk about their composition as *images* very often, presumably because we think you have to be an art historian or a historian of photography to do that. And what about

music? As a university professor you spend your days surrounded by young people, who spend their days surrounded by music, and yet the strange thing is how very rarely you talk about it. And yet music, particularly at the end of the 20th century, is a very powerful way of representing places. I mean there are geographies written into music. All of this is just a way of saying that I think the question of representation is not trivial, it's not atheoretical, it's not unimportant, it's actually fundamental.

Geographers often regard analysis as much more important than description. Describing places evokes associations of traditional regional geography lacking theoretical and methodological rigour.

Derek Gregory: Theory enters into the process of description because it's a re-description in a way, so analysis very often can be just another way of describing. But I think that to convey in a lecture, in a book, in an article, to people who have never been to a place something of what that place means to you and to those who live there, your experience of it or other people's experience of it, seems to me to be so important and so difficult.

Paradoxically, description *appears* much easier at the end of the 20th century than it did in the centuries before. At the end of the 18th century, for example, the French invaded Egypt and Napoleon took with him 150 scholars, artists and engineers, who mapped, measured and drew everything in sight. When they returned to France they produced a multi-volume work called 'The description of Egypt'.² Its plates were the first detailed – and so seemingly 'realistic' – representations of Egypt presented to a European audience. These were not conventional representations – pure fantasies and imaginary scenes – but they were drawn by people who had been there. Other obvious examples include the sketches and engravings that were produced by the artists and draughtsmen who accompanied Cook on his voyages in the South Pacific, or the accounts published by von Humboldt on his return from South America. All these representations were brought back to a Europe which was set alight by them, which awakened a new sense of *wonder*, and I think in some ways too even a sense of *responsibility* – we might not like the forms that responsibility took, but at least it was a sense of moral *connection*. Now fast forward: at the end of the 20th century it is so easy to sit down and turn on the TV news, and have images stream in – selectively, to be sure – from all over the world. That sense of ease, of facility, of *familiarity*, has dulled that sense of wonder, it's removed that sense of moral connection. So one of the reasons that description and representation have become such a responsibility to us as intellectuals is that most people take them for granted. They are accustomed to having the world displayed before them, they see the world in structured, stereotypical ways. Our task, I think, is to unsettle these conventions, to recover and

² *Description de l'Égypte ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française* (Paris: Impr. impériale: puis Impr. royale, 1809-1822).

describe the world in much more interesting ways, in many more multidimensional ways [...]. I think that one of the biggest responsibilities we have as geographers is shaking our students out of that complacent view that they know all this, that they know the world, that it contains no surprises for them, no wonder, and description is really not very difficult [...]. The first job of geography is to make people lost, in a way, to disconcert them, to make them realise that they don't know the world they live in, they really don't, and that it's incredibly *difficult* to know: and then we can talk.

We have learnt to think in dichotomies such as description on the one hand and specialised analysis on the other. The first is considered to be atheoretical, and this view has eventually led to the demise of regional geography. Are geographers today capable of providing the kind of theoretically informed description of places that you have in mind?

Derek Gregory: In the English-speaking world over the last five or ten years there has been much more interest in representation, but for the most part it's been in the *analysis* of representation – in *reading* representations – so that there are very many quite brilliant cultural geographers working in Britain and North America who could tell you far more about these postcards [of Heidelberg] than I could, for example, who know about art history, about the cultural construction of perspective and what happens when you construct the landscape in these particular ways. Equally, of course, there are analyses building on the wonderfully suggestive work of Brian Harley, of the map as an instrument of power, which raises exactly those questions about why is this on the map and not that, is this the view of a white colonising population, and how did native people map their world?

If we have become very good at the analysis of representation and much more critical of it than we were in the past, I don't think that we've got any better at representation itself: we can explain why it's so difficult, why it's important – which is what I've been doing – but what we *do* in producing our own geographies is still very weak in terms of working with representations.

I think too that descriptions are always theoretical. I would say that the most important change in my work in the last five years or so has been a wonderful sense of freedom that comes from realising that no one theory is going to give you everything. There is no single point of view from which everything makes perfect sense. To discover that you did not have to choose between or even agree with Habermas or Giddens, but you could read their work in more critical ways, in ways that they didn't want you to read it, that you could take something from it, but not everything, that you could read 'theory' as a source of ideas but not treat it as a complete, closed and transparent vision of the world – all of this was wonderful. There is a real sense of liberation in realising that, the sociologist Michael Mann says it very well, 'society is much messier than our theories of it', and most of our theories do clean up the

world, tidy it up and make it wonderfully ordered so that everything fits together. For years I lived in two worlds, one a ‘theoretical’ universe where intellectually and theoretically everything balanced, and the other much more mundane, ordinary and grubby, where things never seemed to quite come together.

But thinking and working in the spaces *between* different theoretical systems is also uncomfortable, not least because it means you can never stop reading, you can’t say, well I’ve surveyed the field and I’ve decided that (say) Habermas or Giddens has said the last word. You can’t stop reading and, in consequence, you can’t hide the contradictions. These people don’t all say the same thing, and you can’t round off the edges and fit them all together, and assume that if you take a bit of Foucault, a bit of Habermas and a bit of Derrida and a bit of Giddens, then somehow everything is there – it doesn’t work like that, the ideas don’t fit, and that’s what’s so wonderful, because there is a real creative tension in the spaces in between. This doesn’t mean that all points of view are equally valid, of course. It’s still important to make political, intellectual, ethical choices. The reasons for working with one set of theories rather than another are not just matters of internal logic, it’s not just a matter of things fitting together: there are political and ethical choices you have to make as well, so that there are some theories that for me anyway must be not only criticised but *resisted*. The last thing I’d say is about the importance of meetings like this, of realising that other people have different sets of ideas that they work with, they have different agendas. If geography is to continue to be an intellectually vital discipline, it won’t do it by having a single agenda. Perhaps that made sense ten or twenty years ago, but it doesn’t any more, and you’ve got to have not just multidimensional descriptions – as I said earlier – but multidimensional disciplines which aren’t dominated by a single set of ideas, a single monolithic research agenda. But for that to work I think there has to be maximum discussion, and maximum respect for the ideas of other people, and that’s often particularly difficult.

Much of recent Anglo-American work in human geography deals very artfully with a huge variety of different theoretical approaches. But how do you make your selection – why Hegel and Habermas, Foucault and Derrida, for example?

Derek Gregory: There are a number of different ways of answering that. One is that I’m a historical creature, by which I mean that the people who have taught me have influenced me very much, I was made a disciplinary subject in part by the people who taught me, and who taught me geography in a particular way and opened up a particular horizon of meaning. But it’s not just an historical thing, it’s also a geographical process because I’m aware of all those other places I’ve been and the people that I’ve met, spoken with and talked about.

I would say that most of my research has happened by accident rather than design: I've never had a grand design (or not one that lasted for more than a week). And that has had two consequences. One is that I have learnt to trust myself and to try to understand how it is I work. I don't worry about setting off without a road-map to guide me. I don't worry, either, on those days when I try to write and nothing happens; I've come to accept that I think *through* the process of writing – I'm never just 'writing up' something I've previously worked out in my head – and so I've come to read the signs: to know when I *can* write, and to wait until that moment comes. It's not a 9 to 5 job. So learning to know and trust yourself is important.

Secondly, it's necessary to cultivate a kind of openness. I don't have a grand theoretical scheme or some great agenda that I want to set in motion, and graduate students have been especially important in confounding those dreams! I've been lucky enough to have graduate students who have always done their research and not mine, who have always disagreed with me, and who have always become close friends of mine. All of that has meant that the conversations we've had have been remarkably open. I've been very fortunate in finding myself in an intellectual culture which gives me on the one hand the freedom to be a trespasser, to wander around, and on the other hand the support that helps me to do it. I do think that a sense of respect for others is extremely important in all this. I don't mean that you shouldn't disagree with people. But I think that some of the most recent debates in geography have been vicious, ugly and brutal; it ought to be possible to disagree in constructive ways that are not personally hurtful.

But if you don't constantly open yourself to the ideas of others then you won't be working in the space between different theories, and nothing new will ever happen. My best advice is to be open to accidents, whether they are people you meet, a book that falls off the shelf when you go to the library, and constantly to keep open your sense of what geography is. I was lucky because I was taught by people for whom the question 'is it geography?' was a profoundly non-geographical question [...].

Could you give us your definition of the term 'imagination'? It seems to be an ambiguous concept – is it creativeness, fantasy or illusion? Perhaps concentrating on imagination and representation is a dangerously seductive approach?

Derek Gregory: You won't be surprised to know that I don't have a definition of or a single meaning of imagination. It certainly includes all the things that you mentioned. I'd want to insist on both the creative implication – that without an imagination, theoretical, intellectual, political, empirical, without that kind of imagination geography just becomes an endless repetition of the same – and also the psychoanalytic implication of desire, of fantasy, of the unconscious, so that I'm interested in the ways in which our representations exceed our intentions, and so to reflect carefully

on those cultural constructions seems to me to be extremely important. Now in ‘Geographical imaginations’³, I began each chapter with two quotations, one from a novel or a play, and the other quotation from a geographical essay. I did this because I wanted to challenge what I think is a much too easy, a far too ‘seductive’ distinction between fact and fiction.

Let me give you an example. My PhD thesis was a study of industrialisation in England in the 19th century.⁴ When I started the project I was going to use the concepts and the methodologies of systems theory. I wanted to study the emergence of the factory system and I thought that this would be a wonderful empirical example to explore that theoretical grid. But as I started to read the work of social historians, I discovered that there were really quite other ways of knowing the past, that the chapters that I had drafted for my thesis were really remarkably dull and lifeless. They were full of abstractions and they were full of diagrams with boxes and arrows and equations filling whole pages, and yet when I turned to the world of the social historians they were written like novels and here were real people, messing up this ordered landscape and making it irregular and complicated, noisy and crowded. So it seemed to me important to go into the archives and discover more about the people the historians were writing about. I spent three years doing that, and as I read through the archives, I started to recognise the same people occurring again and again, the same voices and the same arguments, to the point where I began to think that I knew them. And then I realised that this was a seductive fantasy. I remember giving a paper at a conference of humanistic geographers, people in full retreat from spatial science and systems theory. They all nodded their heads at the first part of my paper, because I seemed to have recovered real people, and their voices were speaking from the archives; but many of them were outraged by the second part, because I said, in effect, that everything I had told them was fiction. What I had done was go into the archives and convince myself that I knew these people, and I then turned them into – gave them voice as – characters in a play which I had written. I hadn’t lied, I hadn’t simply made things up, but what I could recover from the archives was so partial, so incomplete, that if they could have walked through the door and I were to say, ”Ah it’s Joe Smith, I know you, this is the kind of person you are”, they’d have hit me in the teeth.

This is all a way of saying that the distinction between fact and fiction is something which worried me very early on, and that the reason that I talk about ‘imagination’ is partly to remove some of those distinctions. Behavioural geographers used to talk about the ‘real’ and the ‘perceived’ environments, for example: how they

³ Derek Gregory, *Geographical imaginations* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

⁴ Derek Gregory, *Regional transformation and industrial revolution: a geography of the Yorkshire woollen industry* (London: Macmillan; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

ever thought they were going to get to the 'real' environment somehow outside of 'perception', beyond representation, I have no idea, except that the real was always supposed to be the scientific. Scientists were supposed to be free from perceptions, to be uniquely blessed with the opportunity to see the real; it was the rest of us who had perceptions, because that's the everyday world of fantasy and error and delusion. So I use the word imagination to get at the way in which we're *all* creative – scientists, people who work outside universities, everyone.

Theorising space⁵

Derek Gregory: For the past four or five years, I've been developing a course at UBC. Most departments of geography in the English-speaking world have similar courses, called 'The philosophy of geography', 'Geographical thought', 'Geographical thought and practice', 'The history and philosophy of geography'. Looking at the way in which that course is usually taught, I realised that it's typically a course in other languages and other disciplines. It's organised around a series of -isms and -ologies, so that separate weeks, separate seminars are devoted to positivism, realism, phenomenology, structuration theory, structuralism, poststructuralism, and in most cases discussion begins a very long way away from geography and then projects those philosophical and theoretical debates into geography. And there are a number of textbooks which are organised in exactly that way. Now, I've come to the conclusion that while that's one way of doing it, it's certainly not the only way and it's certainly not the best way. It's a mistake, I think, because it places philosophy on a pedestal and it assumes that different philosophies are like views from the tops of mountains. If you climb to the top of 'Mount Positivism' or 'Mount Realism', or sometimes 'Mount Giddens', you are supposed to have this wonderful clear view, and from the top of the mountain you can then shout instructions down to people in the valley below busy with supposedly more mundane empirical work. I think this approach misrepresents what philosophers would now tell you their project is about, and that it also misunderstands the nature of empirical work. So, for me anyway, it's important, yes, to read philosophy and to think about philosophical questions but not to do so in such a way that philosophers are assumed to have all the answers because they have asked all the right questions. It's much more important to engage them in a *dialogue* and even to disagree with them! There are questions that philosophy can't help us with, but that doesn't mean that we stop asking those questions. So what I have tried to do at UBC is to develop a course which is organised around what I call a series of site visits. It's like a journey, and at each site we stop and we look at places where geographers have done their most characteristic work. Now I don't mean that geographers are the only people working at these sites, in some cases they are joined by many others, but these sites are probably the places where we have done our most characteristic work: so we explore ideas like 'place', 'space', 'nature', 'landscape'; practices like 'mapping', 'fieldwork'; and we situate geography in relation to a series of other discourses that inform and enlarge our understanding of these questions.

⁵ *Villa Bosch*, Wednesday, 25th June 1997, 9.30 to 13.00. As many of the participants were thirsty for 'authoritative knowledge', Derek Gregory provided a short introductory statement – emphasising the multiplicity of viewpoints, the need for crossing disciplinary boundaries and the necessity of making informed choices.

They are in a way conceptual construction sites, places where *work* is done – and remains to be done.

I see it as a journey across a very complicated map, an archipelago made up of islands of concepts which connect in all sorts of ways. The way in which you travel across the map, the ‘souvenirs’ that you pick up at each place as a kind of intellectual tourist, shapes the kind of geography you produce. And I talk about the concepts rather than the theories, because I find Foucault and Canguilhem very interesting when they suggest that some of the most revealing intellectual histories, some of the most revealing intellectual critiques, come from a ‘history of concepts’ – not the history of theories but a genealogy of these construction sites where work is done, elaborating and dismantling and rebuilding concepts.

So let me just say something about one of those site visits: ‘space’. What I will do is just identify very quickly three phases in the development of our modern understandings of space and then spend most time on that third phase and ask you some questions about its implications. I begin by thinking about language, because many of the problems that we encounter in constructing concepts of space involve, in really quite fundamental ways, problems of language: most fundamentally, I suppose, the distinction between ‘society’ and ‘space’, but we encounter also the problem of translation itself. I’m quite sure that the English word ‘space’ doesn’t carry within it exactly the same connotations as the German ‘Raum’, I’m equally sure that ‘Raum’ doesn’t mean quite what the Swedish geographers mean when they talk about ‘rum’, and it’s certainly not what French geographers mean when they talk about ‘espace’, so these are all complicated matters of language. But I want to make a distinction between two sorts of language system, a formal language system and an ordinary language system. In a formal language system – the clearest example of that is geometry – language operates in terms of purely formal qualities, it’s ruled by logic, by a series of abstract operations. So, for example, if I were to give you a triangle with one side like this and another side like this and draw a line between them, and if I were to tell you that the square on this side is equal to the sum of the squares on this side and on this side, within a formal language system you wouldn’t sit there and draw lots of different triangles, measure them, add them up and check that I was right; neither would you go out and build some triangles and see that that theorem is true, whether the triangles are made of wood or iron or steel or concrete: *it wouldn’t matter* because all those operations can be conducted in the abstract. So, it’s characteristic of a formal language system that the elements that make it up – the lines, the points, the X’s and the Y’s – have *unassigned* meanings, they are not tied to anything in particular. Now let me give you the geographical version of this. Imagine a topographical map with rivers, contour lines, railroads, towns. The first stage in constructing a formal language system is to remove all directions, all scales and all names on the map. Let’s suppose we are interested in the spatial distribution of the

towns. We remove everything else from the map except the locations of those towns. The first stage is then to think geometrically about the location of those towns: you might, for example, call upon various versions of location theory, central place theory, to make sense of their spatial distributions, but remember it doesn't matter whether those towns are in Germany, in Austria, in Wales or in the plains of Canada. The second stage in the construction of this highly abstract formal language system involves abstracting away from the fact that these are towns you are interested in; they just become dots on the map, so you can develop a series of what are technically called point-process models, a series of mathematical models [...], and at this level it no longer matters that those dots refer to places on a map, let alone places in (say) Germany, they're simply point locations in a geometric space. You are no longer even using location theory or central place theory, you are using various forms of purely statistical analysis to investigate the relationships between these point locations in an abstract statistical space. In English-speaking geography, for much of the 1960s and on into the 1970s, the belief was that the purest form of geographical science would be that which could construct the most abstract form of space, that could expose the most basic and universal of geometrical principles, so that we ought to understand space in purely formal terms [...].

The critique of that approach – of the vision of spatial science that you find in books like Haggett's 'Locational analysis', Bunge's 'Theoretical geography', most of the contributions to Haggett's and Chorley's 'Models in geography'⁶ – basically argued that it *does* matter what those dots on the map refer to: it matters firstly that they are dots on a map, but the objects themselves matter, and you can't expect to produce a meaningful, helpful, revealing analysis unless you know whether the dots on the map refer to the distribution of towns, the distribution of measles, or the distribution of people with red hair. It *makes a difference*, so you can't reduce geography to a purely abstract form of geometry. This sort of critique was sustained by a renewed interest in 'the things themselves', and the things themselves were analysed for the most part using ordinary language systems, systems where the elements of the language have assigned meanings, so that *what* you are talking about matters. This involved geographers drawing on the vocabularies of the other social sciences, occasionally the humanities, but principally economics and sociology and to some measure anthropology.

And thinking like this, two things happened. The first was a division within human geography which repeated a division to be found across the whole field of the social sciences. On one side were those who thought that 'the things themselves' could be explained best using vocabularies of human agency, vocabularies which directed our

⁶ Peter Haggett, *Locational analysis in human geography* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), William Bunge, *Theoretical geography* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1962), Richard J. Chorley and Peter Haggett (eds.) *Models in geography* (London: Methuen, 1967).

attention to people, either as individuals or as groups. And out of that emerged the tradition of humanistic geography, concerned with the world of intention, value, meaning, action. And on the other side were those who thought that 'the things themselves' could be understood best in terms of a vocabulary of a system, or structure, and out of that various versions of structural Marxism, of systems theory, were developed within geography. So that's the first consequence of these ordinary language systems. We find ourselves dividing human geography in much the same way as the other social sciences are divided.

The second consequence was that we became so interested in the things themselves, and in the vocabularies of those other social sciences, that 'space' was treated as a kind of result, a residual outcome, so that if you were a humanistic geographer you spent a great deal of time trying to understand people's intentions, people's perceptions, how people work, how people do things, and when you understood their view of the world, their representations of the places they occupied, their intentions in carrying out particular social practices, geography became a kind of cinema in which these understandings were projected onto space which was simply a screen and a particular place emerged as a result of their actions. The same thing happened in relation to various versions of structural geography, structural Marxism, structural functionalism, systems theory, where you constructed an elaborate social architecture. If you followed say Castells or Althusser, then you might have an economic level, which would be the base of the building, and then a series of political levels and then on top of that a series of cultural levels. Once the architecture was constructed, then a light could be shone through it so that the structure was projected onto the ground. What you had, again, was spatial structure seen as a result, an outcome, of social processes and social structures. Now, you might be surprised to find that I'm suspicious of those who think you can abandon a formal language system altogether; in fact, I think that some of the categories and concepts of spatial science ought to be reclaimed, reworked and made to tell very different stories in different settings. But I think the move to an ordinary language system was none the less extremely important: except that it had two damaging consequences. Firstly, the division between agency on the one side and structure on the other side, and secondly the idea that you could understand either agency or structure, let alone the two of them together, without incorporating productions of space from the very beginning: not as a residual outcome. I don't think that space is something which emerges at the end because that involves treating space as an object in itself, it seems to me that space rather ought to be thought of as a property of the objects from the very beginning.

In the 1980s it seemed to me that Giddens' structuration theory was important as a way of elucidating the claims that I have just made. I should say that I don't see the relationships between 'agency' and 'structure' as universal, as Giddens plainly does; I

think that the relationships between them vary over time and often over space, so that I don't see one single model operating. But I do think it's important to try to find ways of incorporating agency and structure into our accounts, and this is a problem not just theoretically and conceptually, it's also an operational problem. It's not very difficult for me to stand up and draw diagrams on the board over there and tell you in principle how all this works, but the question is how do you make it work in a particular study, and that's not going to be resolved in purely theoretical terms. Giddens also accepts that you can't understand either agency or structure without understanding the way in which space is implicated in the practices that are spun between them. This moves us into a third phase – though not, I think, a 'third space'! – and Giddens was not the only person making these kind of suggestions: various people elaborated them in various ways. What happened through the 1980s and into the 90s in English-speaking geography was firstly a move away from formal language systems – space as pure geometry – and secondly, a move towards socialising human geography and spatialising social theory.

Now, I want to say a few things about where I think we are now, since we have gone a long way beyond structuration theory. My thumbnail sketch gives the impression of a single track of 'progress' and I don't think that's at all plausible (or desirable). Through the 1970s and into the 80s there probably *was* a sense that you could write the recent history of geography as one or maybe two paths being followed, with people shouting messages to one another through the forest, some on this path, some on that path, and that somewhere in the middle of the forest were the spatial scientists – eventually a GIS was parachuted down and they found a way out. But I think that most of us now accept that it's much harder to see those single tracks, it's much harder to identify a single direction.

I'm struck by how many of my colleagues who think they have left spatial science behind, still think in its categories, me included, how many of us continue, often in an implicit way, to draw upon its concepts, its vocabularies and its languages. Sometimes these languages are given new meaning by working in a different context. The obvious example is David Harvey; I think he's been a spatial scientist of sorts all his working life, but I also think that his developing work has been the single most important contribution to our discipline by any English-language geographer this century. And yet it's taken him in some ways not very far from spatial science at all: he still thinks there is a system of spatial order, that underneath the complexity and the apparent chaos of the world there is a systematicity, that there is if not a spatial pattern then a necessary spatial structure. His space-economy is ordered and organised [...]. More than this, he says that you really can't understand the capitalist economy without understanding the way in which space is implicated in its operation. But if you look at the concepts that he uses, and in particular his notion of time-space compression – which is really just political economy plus the friction of

distance – if you were to read Harvey’s work very carefully you would find, I think, that there are still a series of profoundly important geometric concepts at work. The other examples you might find more surprising. Doreen Massey’s critique of Harvey entails the development of what she calls a ‘progressive sense of place’, in which we understand time-space compression not just as the world collapsing in at one point, but as something which is highly variable over space and in which different places are differently implicated in complex nets of economic, political, social and cultural relations. And what’s the vocabulary she uses to talk about this conception? She calls it a ‘power geometry’, and again in the ways in which she has thought about industrial change and restructuring, the ways in which places are implicated in networks of various kinds, the language is a geometric, topological one. One might make similar claims about, say, Nigel Thrift, even Gillian Rose, whose attempts to chart what she calls ‘paradoxical space’ press into service the language of geometry, and on occasion even the language of physics. Now I make this point not as criticism, but to emphasise that the simple sequence that I presented to you at the beginning, encoded in a progressive narrative in which the past is always receding, left further and further behind, is really quite deceptive. Many of those early, ‘formal language’ concepts have been reactivated in the 1990s, and geometry now reconfigured as a social, political, cultural construction seems to me to be extremely important.

I also want to acknowledge that if you read the work of August Lösch you realise that you are dealing with a mind which could conceive of multiple geometries, not just one, and yet I think that the tragedy of it all is that the location theory developed in Britain and North America kept assuming that there was one single geometry to be discovered, there was a fundamental spatial order, which could be represented in the same geometrical terms. In the course of the 1990s we have come to appreciate that we live in a world of multiple geometries which are superimposed, which collide, and which can’t be reduced to one simple universal scheme. When I talk about multiple geometries you would be right to be suspicious. What I mean by that is that for me some of the most interesting work at the moment is concerned by the ways in which space is implicated in the operation and outcome of social processes.

It’s not easy to characterise this work, which is extraordinarily diverse, and reaches far beyond the confines of our own discipline. But I can highlight some general issues.

The first is a suspicion of what I call adjectival geographers, by which I mean a suspicion of separate ‘economic’ geographies, ‘political’ geographies, ‘cultural’ geographies, ‘social’ geographies. If you are interested in the global circulation of information and the part that the transnational public sphere plays in the project of colonialism, for example, is it an economic geography, is it a cultural geography, is it a political geography, is it a social geography? Of course it’s *all* those things. And it

may very well be that we have divided the world up too quickly into the economic, the cultural, the political, the social. So a suspicion of those kinds of adjectival geographers.

Secondly, a recognition of how partial and situated our knowledges are. In the case of Britain, which I know best, through the 1960s into the 1970s there was remarkably little interest in the world beyond the West, and the assumption was that the models that were being developed in the West could be applied to other places beyond the West with at best minor modifications. But as we've come to understand the history of geographical knowledges in more critical, less triumphalist terms, we've come to understand how extraordinarily arrogant that assumption was. We've also come to understand, in consequence, how partial and limited our own constructions of knowledge are. But I think in doing so we've also come to understand that there's nothing unusual in that. I've always been interested in the work of those anthropologists who have gone not to Africa, not to Latin America, not to the South Pacific, but into the laboratory, where they have looked at what scientists actually do. They have written ethnographies which show how science is carried on as a social practice [...]. Physical science, for example, is always located, it takes place in a laboratory, in a very particular site, with a very particular group of people, and a particular network is built around them: you can see this in studies of science as a 'gentleman's pursuit' in the 16th and 17th centuries and you can see it in studies of IBM in the 20th century. Successful scientific experiments depend upon site-specific inquiry; it's *this* lab, with *these* people, backed by *this* money, working with *this* equipment. Suppose their experiment fails. Now of course, if we believe some versions of the philosophy of science, when the experiment fails you just give up: the hypothesis is falsified. But of course real scientists rarely give up so readily. They tinker with the equipment, they alter it, they apply for more money, they bring in more students, they set them to work, they carry on, moving, adjusting, re-designing, re-running the experiment. Eventually they come up with a result, and it's published. Publication is itself interesting because you then have to produce a larger geography, in effect you have to show what you have done in this lab, with this equipment, would plausibly work elsewhere, and you have to publish it in such a way that people are convinced. What then happens is that other teams in other laboratories around the world, sometimes borrowing people from you, reading your ideas – so it's the circulation of information again – [...] try to reproduce your results. Seen like this, even 'hard science' proceeds on the basis of 'local knowledge' which, through the construction of these elaborate networks in space and time, gradually becomes more extensive [...]. In other words physical science is a situated knowledge too, and its success depends precisely on its ability to translate its findings and its practices and its concepts from one site to another to produce and fill these networks. It follows that the kind of universality that the physical scientists claim is an *achievement*, and it's a *conditional*

achievement, dependent upon particular social practices. The same is true of any activity in the humanities and social sciences too. Whatever we do is always going to be grounded in a very particular situation, and we need these wider conversations to see just how far we can take it, just how far these ideas will travel before they fall apart.

A third issue is the increasing interest in attempting to develop an understanding of space which is at the same time an understanding of nature. And in case that's misunderstood, I don't think that means the integration of physical and human geography. I do think that many, perhaps most physical geographers seek to understand nature in such a way that concepts of space play an important part in their work, but I suspect that their concepts of space are radically different from our own. Conversely I think that there are now many human geographers whose interest in concepts of space increasingly takes them into theorising nature, but my suspicion is that we theorise nature in ways which many of our colleagues in physical geography simply wouldn't recognise [...].

The theoretical debates that you've just summed up for Anglo-American geography have – to some extent – had their reverberations here. However, empirical research and applied work have been much more prominent than sophisticated theoretical reflections.

Derek Gregory: We need to understand why this 'theoretical attitude' developed in Anglo-American geography. Many people who were involved in the so called 'quantitative revolution' of the 1960s insisted again and again that it was not primarily a quantitative revolution at all, but that it was a *theoretical* revolution. There were two main reasons for this. One is very much bound up with the sort of intellectual arguments that I sketched earlier, with some of the internal problems of traditional regional geography, and these turned on intrinsically theoretical, conceptual, scientific issues: on the explanatory power released by 'theory'.

But I think that there was – and still is – another side to this which is institutional rather than intellectual. I have in mind not simply the academy and the restructuring of what Bill Readings calls 'the university in ruins' as a special sort of transnational corporation increasingly and intimately involved in the commodification of knowledge. I'm also thinking about the ways in which what happens in universities is increasingly and intimately linked to what happens in the cultural and publishing industries. This is important because the 'theoretical attitude' of the new geography in the 1960s and 70s, and the fixation upon a rather different kind of 'theory' across the whole field of humanities and social sciences in the 80s and 90s, was brought about, in part, because 'theory travels': and if it travels, then it sells. Suppose I had spent my life within the academy working on Egypt in the 19th century. I suspect that if I had confined myself to a nominally empirical account – however scholarly,

however complex – I would now have great difficulty finding a publisher because these are such strictly commercial enterprises and they would wonder: how big *is* the market for a close empirical study of 19th century Egypt? But a book that uses ‘Egypt’ to deploy supposedly larger theoretical arguments might travel much further. Of course, editors and publishers think theory travels because they think theory is rootless. Actually theory is remarkably rooted. Habermas may think he is describing ‘modernity’ but we all know that he is describing post-war Germany. Equally, Talcott Parsons claimed to be theorising ‘modern society’ but we know that this sketch turned out to be the post-war United States. Theories are much more closely tied to their contexts than we normally credit, but there is a claim to generality within this theoretical attitude, which means that ideas must travel.

If in the English-speaking world fewer and fewer scholars in our own discipline have devoted themselves to the study of particular places, the irony is that it’s over exactly that same period that outside the academy publishers throughout Britain and North America have been busily publishing more and more travel writing: writing about particular places that *does* travel. If you went into a book store in Britain or in North America ten years ago, there would be a section labelled ‘travel’, but it would probably have contained maps and guidebooks. You go now, and the section on travel is four, five, six times the size that it was. It still contains guidebooks, but ones which now invest much of their space in the aestheticisation of place, guidebooks which are truly works of art, full of colour and illustration, many of them written by academics. But you will also find accounts of people who have been to places and have interesting personal, even idiosyncratic things to say about them. So there is this strange double movement. Through the 70s and the 80s geography in the English-speaking world lost its attachment to places and the people that lived in them. We found it increasingly difficult to describe what those places were like, and we assumed that if we were going to find a larger audience, if our ideas were going to travel, if we were going to speak to large questions, we had to do so using a stylised theoretical vocabulary; in this sense perhaps theory is the most imperial instrument of all, since the impetus to globalise and universalise within most forms of theory is so powerful. And yet in the same period the literature on travel – on the variousness and difference of the world – exploded and found audiences far beyond the dreams of any of us. As I said earlier: we really do need to attend to representation!

There must be some criteria for making choices between different theories, some strategies for conducting a discourse between the extreme positions of either absolutism or relativism?

Derek Gregory: I don’t think that we should place philosophy on a pedestal, and we should not therefore constantly turn to philosophy as an arbitrator or a legislator to settle all appeals that are made to it as some kind of tribunal. It’s not the supreme

court of the academy, still less I think is it the supreme court of late 20th century society. Now that isn't to say that I think philosophy is unimportant or unilluminating, or that we cannot learn a great deal from conversations with philosophers. But I don't need philosophy to convince me that poverty is wrong, that exploitation is wrong, that abuse and violence are wrong – and if the philosophers are incapable of telling me that poverty is wrong, exploitation is wrong, abuse and violence are wrong, then so much the worse for philosophy! When I look at some of the philosophical disputes over absolutism and relativism, about whether it's possible to come to any universal conclusion or whether we each retreat back into our own systems of belief and leave everybody else to theirs, when I look at those discussions in a world in which millions of people are starving and are imprisoned without good reason, I feel a great sense of rage. So if philosophy can't settle those questions I'm quite happy for philosophers to go into another room, close the door and argue; but we can hardly suspend our decisions until they have reached a conclusion. We have to find our own way in the world without them.

Just because there are so many different ideas and approaches does not mean that they all have to be treated as equally valid. The first time you encounter a different view you treat it with respect, in much the same way that the first time you encounter any person you treat them with respect; but the more you get to know people, the more you realise that there are some who are worthy of your respect and others who are not, and eventually you make choices out of that *practical* encounter. By extension, very often we can't choose between competing points of view on the basis of some abstract philosophical principle, still less on the basis of Philosophy with a capital 'P' [...].

But to get back to your question of how one makes these choices, I would say these things: firstly, I do think as academics and as intellectuals we need to spend some time thinking about just what it is in our power to do. We need to understand how the academy is structured and shaped, we need to understand, of course, how power operates within it, but we need to understand the positions that academics have filled both historically and in the present, and that means that it's important not to have exaggerated ideas of our own importance. It means that there are limits to the academy and its political effectiveness. It means that we don't occupy some position of overview in which we alone are the people who can map out the course of a better and more just and more humane society. On the other hand, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't continue to say things about those questions. We shouldn't undervalue what we can do either, and I don't just mean that education is an absolutely vital and continuous moment in the construction of a better and more just society. Of course, one hopes that's true [...]. But changing the world is too important to be left to academics – which is why for the most part it isn't left to academics – but it's also too important *not* to involve them. So we have a part to play in that

process. But the very least we can do, as we make our choices, is ensure that these ideas make a difference not to 'the world' but to our *being* in the world. There would be something very wrong about the project of a critical human geography that was full of exaltation, full of slogans, in which we keep insisting that the world is such an awful place, and that we must radically change it, and which did not require us to change the way in which we live our day-to-day lives. So for me, reading around two sets of ideas – around feminist theory and feminist geography and around post-colonialism and postcolonial theory – materially effects how I behave in the classroom and how I behave on my way home and at home. To be sure, these ideas might help people to construct programmes to produce a better world, but at the very least, if reading these ideas and teaching other people about them has altered the way in which on a day-to-day basis I meet with First Nations students in my classroom, if it alters the terms on which I meet with women, gays, straights – if at the very least it can do that, then that's something. There are of course less immediate, less personal and more large-scale interventions – the contract work, the applied work, involvement with government agencies and corporations – but none of them count for very much unless they also transform the way in which we *are* in the world. If, at the very least, we can do something about that, then we've done something.

I also think that it's important to say that we *don't* live in the worst of all possible worlds. There are things about the project of modernity, and about the operations of capitalism, that horrify me. But there are also things in our world which are not dark and sinister, and which it's important to retain. So my last point is that there is hope – we haven't reached 'the end of history' and there is still much to struggle for [...]. Marx was right, people make history but they don't make history just as they please nor under conditions of their own choosing [...]. And I think that it's important that students understand that however they live their lives, they are in some way making their own future. I also want to say that we don't just make our own histories, we are making geographies too, and that we haven't, I think, constructed concepts of space or concepts of nature which are really adequate to the promise of modernity.

Nothing of what I've said is particularly based on philosophical sophistication, and it's certainly not a rule book. I can't tell you how to make the choices you have to make, anymore than I can tell you when you meet a group of people, that these are those that you really ought to like and these are those that you should really avoid, because it's a much more practical matter, it's a matter of practical engagement and interaction. Those choices have to be made with an understanding that they have practical consequences, and so one way of thinking about and choosing between theoretical positions is not just in terms of their logic or their elegance, but in terms of the practical consequences that they have. That is, after all, the test of a truly critical theory.

And what about the idea of postmodernity?

Derek Gregory: Hovering in the background of much of this discussion of globalisation and of time-space compression is this vexed notion of postmodernity, which I have been careful not to use, and I'm careful not to use it for two reasons. One is, I suppose, epistemological, the other is empirical. I'm reluctant to use it, firstly, because the idea that there are these sharp discontinuous breaks in human history seems to me fundamentally wrong, to involve a conception of history, of temporality, that is far too simple. One of the reasons that I continue to find Althusser's work so interesting is precisely because it involves a much more complicated conception of time and historicity. Anyway, the idea put forward by both advocates and critics of postmodernity of an abrupt discontinuity, is something which I find profoundly problematic.

The second reason is that I continue to be both amazed and amused at the lack of historical depth to so many discussions of our late 20th century. I'm struck by how often the general accounts which are offered of globalisation – for example – could be describing Europe in the 19th century, Europe in the 18th century, Europe in the 17th century. Now I'm not saying that nothing has changed, but many of the claims that are put forward about the radical novelty of postmodernity, about systems of flexible accumulation, about globalisation and uneven development require much more rigorous and creative understanding of the historical depth of the geographies that we have inherited [...].

Modernisation, modernity and the city⁷

Various views of the nature of modernity have been discussed today – is it a specific period in time, defined differently in separate discourses, an idea based on a supposed dichotomy between traditional and progressive, a relative concept, an (un-)finished project triggered off during Enlightenment?

Derek Gregory: It's really two sets of reflections I have, the first are fairly general and then the second are much more specific and relate to the movie. Firstly, I want to suggest that modernity has no essence, no single unchanging meaning. It seems to me really useful to go back to Habermas's essay on modernity as an unfinished project,⁸ because Habermas certainly traces the word modern in a number of different European languages and in a number of different dates. But he also shows that it doesn't mean the same thing in different times, in different places. I don't think he makes enough of that, but it seems to me extremely important because if we look at a dictionary of 200 years ago, and look up words that we think we know and look at the definition in a German dictionary, an English dictionary, and compare the meanings that words had then with the meanings that ostensibly the same words have now, we would find considerable, remarkable, and sometimes surprising changes. So this is to say that words acquire meanings in context, that they are not abstract universal essences. This is the basis of ordinary language philosophy, and it prompts two cautionary remarks. One is that we need to be very suspicious of the idea that we will arrive at a single, universally agreed definition of modernity; like so many words that we deploy, it has no fixed single meaning [...]. The other is that when a word like 'modernity' is used in a particular context, it has a practical force, it does something, so you have to ask yourself, who is using this word 'modern' and in what context and to what purpose? There is an extremely interesting book by a French sociologist, Bruno Latour, called 'We have never been modern'.⁹ Now this is a book which is designed in part to stop the discussion of postmodernity dead by saying that it makes no sense to talk about being postmodern, not because you can't go beyond the modern, but because we have never been modern. And he makes that claim because he says modernity is a story that the West tells itself about itself, it's a mythology, it's used in very particular contexts to very particular ends: to legitimise a particular constellation of power, knowledge and geography [...].

⁷ *Villa Bosch*, Thursday, 26th June 1997, 14.30 to 18.00. A lively discussion developed after a viewing of the short silent movie 'Easy Street' (Charles Chaplin, USA 1917).

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt?' in his *Kleine politische Schriften (I-IV)* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 444-464.

⁹ Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Habermas's argument is that the project of modernity – associated with very particular forms of reason – has its origin in something like a contemporary sense at the end of the eighteenth century, hence obviously the interest in Enlightenment and Kant [...]. So it has its origins in Europe and it is, in that particular sense, a thoroughly Eurocentric construction. But if we follow it through to the end of the 20th century, into debates in China, in Japan, in Singapore, in Korea, in Taiwan, it's surely obvious that 'Modernity' is not being brought over in ships and unloaded at the docks – in other words 'modernity' doesn't just vary in time, but it also varies over space. Modernity has a very complicated historical geography and the different threads that people try to identify as part of the modern are tied together in different ways in different places at different times.

Now let's go back to the movie for my second set of reflections. The first question that occurred to me is to ask about the part that cinema plays in the story the West tells itself about itself [...]. Something very particular starts to happen at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century to the ways in which people in Europe and North America saw their world, to what Martin Jay would call the dominant scopic regime, and it involves a number of elements. First is speed, because surely the cinema enabled people to capture motion and to represent speed in arrestingly new ways. People had tried to do it in words, they had tried to do it in painting, but remember that one of the first exhibitions of moving pictures in Paris was produced by a camera outside a factory as the gates opened and workers streamed out. Now you might say, well, what's modern about that is of course the factory, mass production and a large disciplined work force, but what was really novel about it was the reaction of the audience in the cinema. They ran to get out of the way, they were scared that the people rushing towards them on the screen were going to come out into the cinema and crush them, and that's what I mean about the shocking experience of representing modernity in film. But there is something else about it, an attempt to make visible not just a fast society but also a fractured society, and in very many ways 'Easy Street' does just that. There are a number of different settings in the movie – the house, a police station, a mission, the street – and what the camera does is take you inside those settings and also connect them, and in doing so it makes the city visible in particular ways. There are, I think, two aspects to this. Firstly, we need to understand the difficulty many ordinary people had at the end of the 19th, the beginning of the 20th century, to understand what was happening around them and to make sense of the world in which they lived, because increasingly their experience of the city seemed to be different from that of other people, there wasn't a basis for a common experience, particularly as cities grew larger and as their social geographies became ever more complicated. In Britain for example, there were a number of important urban investigations conducted at the end of the 19th century, and many of their reports used not just the language of science but also the

language of the mission which was taken from Africa and brought back to London. Commentators in the press, in books, even from church pulpits were saying that we know far less about what happens in our cities than we know about what happens in Africa. Explorers, missionaries and travellers had gone to Africa and brought back stories, vivid and important reports of life (and death), and much of the public assumed that they somehow – vicariously – ‘knew’ Africa put on display in museums, in zoos, in exhibitions. But critics worried that much less was known – as a matter of public debate – about what was happening inside their own metropolitan cultures, and so they called for those opaque cities to be made visible. So I think that in the course of the late 19th century you have a very determined attempt to make the city transparent, and it’s no accident that the early movies were for the most part about the city, that they took place in the city and they opened up parts of its life to a more or less public gaze. But the cities they looked at differed dramatically one from another. ‘Easy Street’ is a movie that takes place in Los Angeles – would it take the same form, would the story be the same, if we transferred it to New York, Chicago, Detroit, London, Paris, Berlin?

I’ve said that I don’t think that modernity has a single essential meaning, that it’s context-dependent, that the word is used in different societies by different groups of people in different ways and for very particular purposes. For Latour modernity is not only a story that the West tells itself about itself, it’s a story which always denies that it’s context-dependent: it’s a story which always claims that the knowledge that it’s producing is universal and applies everywhere. I’ve also said that if we look at the part that cinema has played in the construction of our sense of the modern, it’s bound up with an attempt to make an increasingly opaque city visible, to bring it into view as a ‘space of constructed visibility’. One of the terms that relays backwards and forwards between these two observations is the notion of ‘everyday life’. In much of Europe and North America the notion that people’s day-to-day lives are ordinary, mundane, that they have a routine, what in the English language is called the ‘daily grind’, gains a particular prominence in the course of the 19th century, and it’s marked by a whole series of developments including the practice of reading newspapers. But as the 19th turns into the 20th century the realisation dawns that day-to-day life is not something which is held in common. So in ‘Easy Street’ it was obvious that the experience of everyday life in that district of Los Angeles was fractured by class: you saw the middle-class women coming in on charitable missions to look after the supposedly improvident members of the working class. You could see too that it was fractured by gender: all of the people with strength, all of the people who were able to walk the streets without fear, were men, and it was always women who were being pursued, trapped, pushed into rooms and locked away. What you didn’t see, surprisingly, is that it was also fractured by race: that’s a surprisingly white Los Angeles on the screen, even in 1917.

So I think there are three things that we could usefully talk about. Firstly, who is using this word 'modernity' and to what end, what are the relations of power implicated in its deployment?

Secondly, how is our world – and the worlds of other people – *made* visible? Many sociologists suggest that we are now in a situation where the more knowledge we have, the more uncertain our world becomes. There was once a time when it was widely believed that as knowledge increased, so our sense of certainty would increase, that we would have a much greater command over the world because more and more parts of daily life and the economy would be mapped into it. Yet it might just be that by the end of the 20th century we're finding the more we know, the more uncertain we are in making our world. And thinking of the unknowability, the unsurveyability, the difficulty of taking in the picture as a whole, the importance of vision and visual technologies, you can see that a movie was a really good way to begin our discussion.

Thirdly, we ought to think about this notion of the everyday, the ordinary, which had become such a commonplace notion by the early decades of the 20th century. For if it was common, then, to talk about everyday life as dull, boring, monotonous – the return of the same, day after day – it may be that at the end of the 20th century many people now know the everyday as remarkably *unpredictable*, *insecure*: far from being dull it's something which fills many people with fear because they don't know what's going to happen next. All things seem to be possible in this increasingly erratic, risk-filled society, so maybe our notion of the everyday has to change from a kind of routine, humdrum, repetitive world that the word 'everyday' meant at the beginning of the 20th century. Maybe now, at the end of the century, this notion of the everyday is something which – like modernity – no longer seems so stable, so fixed.

Mapping space¹⁰

Derek Gregory: Most conventional histories of cartography give the impression that the further back in time you go, the less accurate maps become, and the closer you come to the present, the more accurate they become. ‘Accuracy’ there has a very particular meaning, it’s connected to an equally particular concept of objectivity [...]. Modern maps, which are produced under the sign of objectivity, under the sign of Science, are very persuasive – they have considerable rhetorical power – and I just want to give two examples of how this affects contemporary political struggles.

The first comes from the west coast of Canada, where the province of British Columbia still has far, far fewer treaties with native peoples than any other province. These First Nations insist that their claims to the land – land which had been forcibly taken away from them – be settled in the courts and by the law. Now this dispute is a very complicated one, it’s still in process, but it turns in some substantial part on the politics of cartography. Several witnesses have appeared for the government, armed with modern, supposedly objective maps: and if you look at them you see vast areas of empty space. The implication is that such empty spaces could not possibly belong to native people and therefore the land could not have been taken from them: dispossession is made to disappear, erased by the blank spaces – the white spaces – on the map. But other witnesses, some of them geographers, argued the opposite: in effect, saying that just because these maps were professionally compiled using modern surveying instruments, just because these maps had been produced out of numbers written down in notebooks, just because these maps had been printed with such precision – just because these maps were produced under the sign of Science – it *cannot* be assumed that they are therefore ‘objective’, providing a ‘God’s-eye view’ of a transparent space. They were, after all, maps produced by a colonial power determined to bring this strange land and its people within a white horizon and meaning drawn by a European conception of space and a European conception of ownership. These geographers have worked with native peoples, and you immediately realise the problem, because at the time of colonial occupation these were oral cultures, with no written record, so that these reconstructions all depend upon an oral tradition which is typically discounted by those mapping (and legislating) under the sign of Science. This oral tradition involves stories which one generation tells to the next generation, but these are not *just* stories. They involve vitally important local knowledge about which streams salmon will use to come back up river, about where

¹⁰ *Villa Bosch*, Friday, 27th June 1997, 14.30 to 18.00. Taking up one of Derek Gregory’s regional research interests, a conventional map reading exercise led to discussions about the power and politics of maps and from there on to a second set of questions about the concept of the region in geography. Maps used were the sheets ‘Cairo’ from the international map of the world (World (Africa) 1:1,000,000. Series 1301, sheet NH-36, edition 8-TPC, 1960).

the best berries are to be found at different times of the year, about paths to the hunting grounds in different seasons. Recovering this oral tradition and mapping its cultural geographies has involved elaborate cross-checks between the stories that one native group tells, the stories another native group tells and the stories that can be recovered from the accounts of European travellers and explorers – recording how they met people from this tribe in this place gathering berries or fishing at the mouth of this river. What emerges at the end of the day is not a conventional map and certainly not the result of taking out surveying equipment and recording down numbers in notebooks and reducing everything to a geometry. It wasn't a static vision of the landscape at all, but a map drawn on the basis of how people who lived there *used* those spaces. The argument was that native peoples used these spaces in radically different ways than those envisaged by colonial surveyors and cartographers, and a conventional map simply fails to capture that rich, diverse and complex experience. The judge who heard the first case refused to accept these claims: he believed in the incontestable objectivity of the scientific maps, and discounted mappings based on oral tradition, on this much more complicated sense of the occupation of space, as just stories, just myths.

The second example comes from Lake Titicaca, and concerns an attempt by the state to open up the area around the lake for tourism. Now, in order for this to be done two things had to happen. Firstly, it was necessary to produce maps of the region that tourists could use to navigate their way around the shores of Lake Titicaca. In other words this region had to be turned into – or produced as – a space in which outsiders could find themselves. Secondly, it was necessary to ensure that the peasants who lived in the region could be turned into exhibits on display, because the tourists who came to Lake Titicaca expected to see its marvellous floating islands, the reed beds, and the ways in which the traditional peasant economy and culture operated. This in turn meant that the state had to regulate the activities and movements of the peasants by establishing a national park, together with a series of regulations governing land use. And so the state produced its 'scientific' maps with grids and place-names, showing the road system which tourists would use to get to the region, maps which were dominated by the large towns in which the tourists would live, and maps which were dominated by administrative boundaries and zones and by sites where tourists could stop and gaze at the people on display. Now the peasants who lived around the shores of Lake Titicaca and who made their living in this kind of way understandably objected to being treated like animals in a zoo, and so they produced a very different series of maps, and again the issue was fought out in the courts. Their maps were not constructed 'from the outside', using surveying instruments and measuring poles and notebooks, to produce a view from the top looking down. On the contrary, many of their maps looked as though they had been drawn on the back of an envelope. These maps were composite views, comprising

different geometries: sometimes the view is from the top looking down, sometimes the view is from the ground looking this way, sometimes on the ground looking that way, so that the peasants' maps tried to show the uses that insiders made of this space, a space whose practices did not fit the administrative boundaries and regulations of the state. Their maps typically removed the roads linking the region to the rest of the country; they also removed the towns around the edges of the map. The focus of the maps was always the villages where the peasants lived, and each village was shown with a national flag flying above it, so the clear implication was that these places were not enemies of the state but very much *part of* the nation. Again you will not be surprised to hear that the state won its case in the courts and that the national park was established. Here too the argument turned very much on the power of cartography, and the implication was that maps which are not produced under the sign of a very particular Science are not 'objective'.

Now, with those stories of mine, if you go back to look at this map ['Cairo'], you begin to see, I hope, just what a complicated web of power, knowledge and geography is presented here. What I want to emphasise is the claim this map makes to objectivity and the ways in which it turns Egypt and Palestine into objects. This is a view from the outside, it's a world made up of objects in which 'objectivity' depends upon the 'objectness' of space. This is achieved by telling you that everything has been carefully measured, by giving you a grid, a scale, and by showing you that this map fits in to a whole series of other sheets: in other words there is nothing peculiar about this map. What that little diagram on the right shows you, marked 'adjoining sheets', is that this isn't a one-off, there is nothing strange about this map, because the same mapping principles have been used on all these other sheets, they fit into the same jigsaw puzzle, all drawn on the same basis, and so it's objective [...]. The diagram of adjoining sheets is in fact a very powerful way of persuading you that this map is scientific, because in effect it says that this is just how this cartographic technique would show anywhere else in the world, and because the process doesn't vary over space, it's universal, generalisable: objective. Notice, too, that the map includes a 'reliability diagram'. This map is so objective that it shows you which parts of it are more reliable than others! In the areas which appear – significantly – around the very margins of the map, and which therefore presumably don't matter very much, reliability is remarkably poor; and once you have been told that, there's a kind of honesty there, people are saying, look, around here we are not so sure, but up here we are absolutely sure: 'reliability good'. So these markers and diagrams function as ways of claiming objectivity.

It's telling you it in other ways too: not least because it's printed. You could trace this map exactly using a pen or a pencil on paper, and if you put that map on the wall, and you brought in people from the street and you said, ok, which is the more accurate, the more reliable, the more objective map? They would all tell you that it's

the printed one. So simply making this available and reproducing it, is adding to that test of truth.

I'm not altogether sure who has produced this map, it's British Crown copyright, it's published by 'Her Britannic Majesties Stationary Office', it was originally compiled and drawn by the War Office in 1949, presumably after the Arab wars in Palestine in 1947 and 1948. And yet it's also reprinted from a United States Department of Defence publication, so it's difficult to know where the boundaries of responsibility lie. But of course, you know as well as I do, that in most states the history of mapping as a responsibility of the state has its origins in the military. In Britain maps produced by the national government agency are produced by the Ordnance Survey. 'Ordnance' was a military term and these maps started to be produced at the very beginning of the 19th century when there was a fear that Britain was going to be invaded by the French, and so it was essential to map the coastline and the main towns for strategic purposes. And on this map you've got the same series of military objectives here, in which the focus is on communications, roads, railways, airports, the Suez Canal. Notice, by the way, that the Suez Canal is most certainly the 'Suez Canal', in brackets it's allowed to be the 'Quanâ el Suweis'.

The use of language on this map, as I have just implied, is revealing. The main towns are all given their English name with the Arabic in brackets afterwards. There's Alexandria, there's Port Said, there's Cairo, there's Suez and there's Jerusalem: these are the main markers for a western gaze. Now, the language is interesting in another way too. The map includes an Arabic glossary which translates the Arabic words which appear on the map into English. But what it doesn't do is translate the English words which appear in the key back into Arabic. So this is very much a map to be used from the outside by native speakers of English. If you want to know what the Arabic word 'Bîr' means you find it means 'well' or 'rock cistern', but if on the other hand you want to know what 'contour' means in Arabic, you will look in vain because the map won't tell you [...]. The area to the south and west here [of the sheet 'Cairo'] is the land of Michael Ondaatje's 'The English patient',¹¹ and if you've read the novel – or seen the film – you will know about survey expeditions concerned to produce maps just like this, maps which showed height, which showed the watercourses and the wadis, but you will know too, that those men and women who went out into the desert to try to map this landscape had great trouble bringing it into the English or German languages. European languages are very good at providing words for height, for watercourses, for valleys, but they are not very good at providing words for deserts. Many of you will know that the Inuit people of the Arctic have many different words for what we call just 'snow', and the difference matters very much to them. The same is surely true of the desert, this landscape

¹¹ Michael Ondaatje, *The English patient* (Toronto: Vintage, 1992).

which is shown as empty, apart from lots of numbers and names and the occasional watercourse. People who live in the desert are able to read that landscape in a much more complicated way, they can bring this desert into language in a much more detailed way than a map like this. All it does, really, is register heights and occasionally areas of sand dunes, whereas the peoples of the desert would presumably see this space in radically different ways: it certainly wouldn't be in terms of this road network across the Nile Delta and up the valley of the Nile, and these empty areas marked just by numbers would be full of shifting – and no doubt untidy! – detail.

Such a view of maps as powerful representations challenges the idea of cartography as an objective science and obviously has implications for judging new developments, for instance the use of GIS.

Derek Gregory: For too many people reading a map is probably still taught as a purely technical exercise. What we don't spend enough time doing is explaining that maps are, in addition to technical representations also cultural representations. These visual displays are extraordinarily powerful – 'a picture is worth a thousand words' – and a map must be worth even more and yet we've seen just how selective, how artful composing an 'objective' map like this really is. I think, for example, of the Gulf War and the way in which a part of the world was reduced to a series of maps, night after night on CNN, and it became a video game in which a bomb was dropped here, missiles came in here, and because it was treated as an animated but purely graphical display it was very easy to forget that these were real places and real cities that were being destroyed and real people being killed.

I sometimes think that the history of GIS begins in about 1800, when the French army of occupation in Egypt sent a series of surveyors and artists and illustrators up the Nile Valley to record and map everything they saw. The result was published in a series of volumes called 'The description of Egypt'.¹² This consists of page after page after page of maps and plates, and it's posed a problem for scholars trying to grasp its systematicity: but in many ways its organising logic is the logic of GIS [...]. Firstly, the plates in the volumes of 'The description of Egypt' begin round about the first cataract, and they work their way progressively down the Nile heading north. Secondly, when you look at each site it begins with a topographical map, and part of the map is outlined, and it's as though you click on the icon, because when you turn over the page or look lower down the same page, that little area is enlarged, and then when you look at that little area – part of a temple say – it too will be highlighted, and again it's as though you click on the icon and you turn over the page and there is an image of what that temple looks like from that position looking across the landscape, then you turn over the page and the next image is a close-up and you're moving in

¹² Description de l'Égypte, *op. cit.*

closer and closer and closer. Now, this sort of sequence is repeated again and again and again all the way down the Nile Valley, and one has this extraordinary sense of a visual display and interrogation of this landscape on a whole series of different scales.

Looking back at the disciplinary history of regional geography, would you say that it's still a research field that geographers should pursue today and how should they set about it?

Derek Gregory: Firstly I would say that in the English-speaking world most geographers would have no problem in talking about 'regional' in terms of a scale, so they would be quite happy to talk about the international, the national, the regional, the sub-regional, but you notice there that it's being used as an adjective and it relates to a scale at which processes operate, a scale at which analysis is conducted. The idea of the region, however, as an *object* of inquiry rather than a scale at which analysis might be conducted, is obviously a very different one, and certainly the idea that regional geography represents the pinnacle, the summit of geographical inquiry, the magic centre where everything somehow comes together, is I think problematic. Many of the most interesting, consequential stories that we have to tell involve moving *between* scale levels and between different places and can't be told within the confines of one region. When I was doing my study of industrialisation in Britain at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, I didn't see this as an opportunity for a classic regional geography.¹³ Certainly the regional structure of production systems was highly developed: particular industries were associated with particular regions, cotton in Lancashire, wool in Yorkshire, coal in South Wales, iron and steel in the Midlands. And yet in order to explain what was happening within an industry that was highly regionalised, I had to keep travelling a very long way beyond the region. The industry depended on raw wool which was not obtained locally, but had to be brought in through networks of agents, markets and carriers from other regions and even other countries. The rise of the woollen industry in Yorkshire depended on its competitive successes against rival regional production systems, and so I had to keep track of what was happening in the West Country, for example. Its most important export markets were across the Atlantic in North America, so I had to know a great deal about what was happening there. Attempts to stop the growth of the factory system and maintain the traditional domestic system involved a series of political struggles that took people from Yorkshire down to London and back again, and involved a series of extra-regional alliances. In order to understand the radical change which in very many ways was at the heart of the industrial revolution in Britain I had to be constantly moving beyond those places where woollen cloth was manufactured, following networks backwards and forwards, into other regions, right

¹³ Gregory, *Regional transformation*, *op. cit.*

the way down to London and into the Houses of Parliament, and across the Atlantic. That's a story which could never be told by treating Yorkshire as an object [...].

A still common distinction, at least for teaching purposes, is that between analytical geography on the one hand, divided into specialised sub-fields such as population geography, economic geography, social geography, and synthetic i.e. regional geography on the other, where – and this goes back to Hettner's 'länderkundlichem Schema' – all these separate geographies are projected onto each other in a particular region. This traditional concept is not concerned so much with scale, but makes you think more in categories, and it might therefore not even be a very helpful teaching device.

Derek Gregory: It's all very well for me to say that in order to tell a particular story the regional scale of analysis is often extremely important especially in terms of people's experience, people's day-to-day interactions, a kind of space in which people feel at home, giving them a sense of belonging and identity, and then to say that in order to tell stories about these regional spaces you are constantly leaving the region and coming back again [...]. We've developed a series of very powerful methods which enable us to connect the regional scale to other scales, and to conceptualise and recover the processes at work and the characteristic range over which they operate. We've developed a whole series of concepts and methods which enable us to follow these networks and these threads from one place to another and back again, and in doing so we've made the idea of the region porous. You kind of go out and come back and the idea of the region as a fixed object starts to become difficult to maintain.

All of this is very well and good, and represents a considerable advance over classical regional geography. But we have not been very good at dealing with exactly the demand that regional geography originally fulfilled, which is that it's important to give students a sense of not just their place in the world, but a sense of *other* places. While regional geography was, I think, a problematic answer to that demand, it was an answer. The world was divided into regions like a jigsaw puzzle, and you might object that this doesn't have the intellectual depth of a regional analysis that followed these networks all over the place. Certainly it was an approach that reduced the region to a container into which all sorts of facts were poured, and ran the real risk of thinking of regions as real objects. But I think that at least students did come out of those traditional geography programmes knowing a lot about the world. It became very fashionable to make fun of this sort of geographical knowledge: geographers were the ones who knew the capital of Brazil, knew how many sheep were in Australia. And yet one of the tragedies is that I meet so many geographers now who are really *proud* of the fact that they don't know the capital of Brazil, they don't know how important sheep are to Australia. I think that the political and intellectual responsibility of the discipline has contracted and that we have to find another way

of giving students a sense of the diversity of the world that they inhabit, which doesn't reduce itself to classical regional geography. We haven't done that, we've got out of that by talking about techniques and talking about theories, and we have made tremendous advances in both directions, but answering that basic demand of teaching our students about – and teaching them to *care* about – other places, other cultures, and other landscapes – well, I think we have gone backwards.