The pragmatism of life in poststructuralist times

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Abstract. In addressing the question of what might be next in human geography I endeavour to enrich
the debates between Anglo-American poststructuralist and continental European action-theoretical
approaches by bringing 'life' to the geographical subject. In contrast to established conceptualisations
of the geographical self, I will introduce a conception of the self which mediates between the subject
and the subjectified, between voluntarism and determinism, and between consciousness and corpo-
reality. Through this reconceptualisation I do not pretend to provide final answers, but rather seek to
initiate a new stream of thought.

Introduction

Human geography is a science that deals with the relationship between human beings
and their physical, social, and economic environments. It focuses on the spatiality of
human action, and is concerned with the space and place of human being and
becoming. Present-day human geographical theorising is frequently inspired by French
poststructuralist thinking. In the continental European debate in human geography
this approach is often contrasted with a stream of thought which is largely inspired by
late-modernist, critical, and language-pragmatic thinking (for example, Habermas,
Austin, Searle, etc), generally denoted as the *action-theoretical* approach.[1] One of the
crucial issues in this fruitful debate is the position, identity, and causal power of
the subject of spatial actions and practices. Both approaches have in common their
joint interest in human actions and performances as the linkage between the human
being and environment. In both traditions the constitution of the subject as an indi-
vidual with a more or less specific identity, able or unable to take effective action
towards the physical and social environment, is of central importance. Nonetheless,
each approach places rather different emphases on specific aspects of the subject.
Often the positioning of these traditions takes a more strategic form in which the
political economy of differentiation towards the alleged opponent and uncritical self-
reference are essential for the respective scientific identities. At the same time this
reduces argumentation to a rather eclectic endeavour. As a result we often seem to
dance in circles and for many it is not clear what might move the argument ahead.
This puts the pressing question of what is going to be next on the top of the agenda.
With this contribution I suggest a reconceptualisation of the self which might show us
a way ahead, beyond the supposed oppositions.

   In what follows I will first provide a rough sketch of the two aforementioned
approaches—the poststructuralist and the action-theoretical approaches. In doing so,
I will focus on their respective conceptualisations of the *geographic actor* and of her or
his intentionality. Because of the diversity within each of these traditions, I will focus

[1] For a specific human geographical exposé of the action-theoretical approach see Werlen (1993;
1995; 1997) or for a short recap of the most important concepts involved see Werlen (1999). For a
very lucid description and positioning of the language-pragmatic version of geographic action
theory see Zierhofer (2002).

on specific representatives of them—that is, Werlen's action theory and Foucault's poststructuralism. Drawing on the long-neglected, but increasingly known work of the 'postmodern' thinker *avant la lettre* (de Mul, 1991), Plessner, I will then sketch the contours of a conceptualisation of the geographic self that might bridge some of the presumed oppositions.[2] At the same time this could initiate a nonessentialising conceptualisation of the human geographic subject, whose spatial actions are constituted as a sense-making endeavour. By suggesting a way ahead this is a tentative programmatic contribution rather than a conclusive one.

The action-theoretical – poststructuralist debate

Action theory in a general sense deals with the activities human beings engage in in relation to their social and physical environments. Within this broad framework, Thrift, in his seminal paper published in 1983 (see figure 1), distinguished different approaches that, in this enhanced version, range from behaviourist, structuralist, and poststructuralist approaches, via structurationist approaches, including habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and resistance theories (Touraine, 1988) towards classic action-theoretical approaches (Blumer, 1969; Cicourel, 1974; Garfinkel, 1996; Mead, 1934).

The primary difference between these positions is contained in their differing conceptualisations of the *actor* as the *subject* of his or her own actions. At one extreme the term 'subject' is interpreted as the 'subjected', the externally determined self, whereas at the other it is interpreted as the 'subject', as the origin and agent or author of its own free actions. Of course this rough categorisation is too simplified to be the

Figure 1. Determinism and voluntarism in various social theories and subject areas—an approximation (source: adapted and enhanced from Thrift, 1983).

[2] By drawing on the work of Plessner, I also attempt to bridge the gap between Anglo-American and German strains of thought, which is partly a result of the increasing hegemony of the English-spoken scientific media and is an inherent consequence of the relative ignorance of traditions of thought from other cultural realms and language areas.

whole truth. What it is intended to bring to the fore is a difference in emphasis rather than a difference in principle.

The action-theoretical approach

Before I elaborate further on the differences and commonalities between the approaches, let me first briefly state what I mean by an action-theoretical approach.

Symbolic interactionist approaches as well as phenomenological (Pickles, 1985) and hermeneutical approaches are important sources for geographical action theory, which departs not from a conception of the environment as objectified, but from one in which the social world is conceived as lived by human beings in their actions and projects. In the framework of continental (mainly German) human geography it was Werlen (1993) who systematised the action-theoretical approach, building on the insights of Alfred Schütz, Karl Popper, and Anthony Giddens.

According to the action-theoretical approach, human being and doing, including being and acting in space, cannot be conceptualised as 'behaviour' along behaviour(al)istic lines of thought, in which the human being is seen as an automaton, only re-acting to external impulses or conditions according to an innate or learned programme. In an action-theoretical framework human spatial action can adequately be described and understood only by taking into account the intentionality, reflexivity, and embeddedness in normative structures and value systems of human action, as well as their symbolic and affective components. In contrast to the stimulus-response conception of the behaviour(al)ist tradition, the action-theoretical approach starts from the primacy of subjective, group-specific and culture-specific sense-making and goal formulation, which allow individual and collective actors, within certain limits, to reproduce, vary, and produce their own actions and action settings (Weichhart, 1986, page 85; see also figure 2).

According to this approach it is not sufficient to analyse the objectified spatial conditions and mechanisms of human behaviour as they show themselves in the form of spatial patterns and configurations and in our cognitive representations of them.
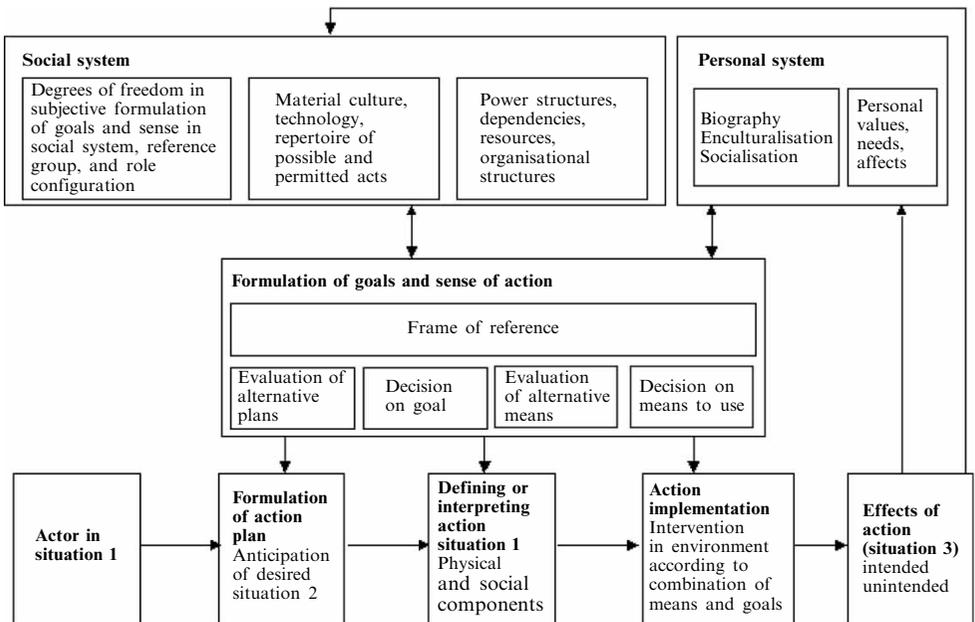

Figure 2. Action-theoretical model (adapted from Weichhart, 1986, page 85 and Werlen, 1998).

Instead of investigating spaces and actors seperately, the action-theoretical approach emphasises human actions and practices as the conjoint geographic object of study. 'Actions' are to be understood as any form of human activity through which the actor seeks a specific goal and which seems to make some 'sense' to the actor. These actions can be overt or mental and also include the deliberate refraining from or toleration of activities.

Every action must be interpreted in the context of the social circumstances in which it occurs. Not every goal is admissible or feasible in a specific social context. The margin of variation is dependent upon existing power relations and the potential for changing them. The implementation of a given action plan is also largely dependent upon the material spatial infrastructure and technology, which can be used as means to reach one's objectives. Through the subjective perception of intended and unintended consequences as either sanction or incentive, the actor learns about the scope and possibility of his or her actions and is assimilated into the relevant environment. The rationality of actions is highly subjective and understanding spatial action is based on a careful reconstruction of the actor's own leading line of argumentation.

The action-theoretical approach, as described here in all its brevity, builds on the insight that people live in an interpreted world of subjectively and collectively constituted meanings, and that meaningful relations with the environment determine who we are. Action-theoretical approaches all strongly emphasise the ability of each interpreting human being in interaction with the environment to come up with new interpretations, or to change or reproduce meanings. Furthermore, limiting or enabling conditions for action first have to be interpreted as such before they can have any influence on action plans. Of course this does not mean that one is free of the effects of one's actions or that the actor is always successful. But, according to the action-theoretical approach, both failure and success are seen as subjective interpretations with substantial degrees of freedom not only to act but to judge the outcome of our actions.

The action-theoretical approach assumes that from the *subjective* standpoint human beings and human actions are well assimilated in a network of meaning and sense in our life worlds and that these subjective worlds of meaningful action can be successfully and authentically *reconstructed* in order to understand spatial action. This theory, therefore, is founded upon the idea of a harmonious, self-evident life world and only in certain problematic situations will new courses of action have to be taken to restore the environmental adequacy of one's spatial actions. This approach offers a valuable new perspective to that provided by behaviour(al)ism as it anticipates the real decision power of the actor both in choosing certain courses of spatial action as well as in interpreting the action setting. It also theorises the intentional, social, and dynamic aspects of these interpretations and actions. This is a first step towards a reconceptualisation of the self, in freeing it from its containment in an individual existence in confrontation with the objectified environment. The self is to be located in the shared social world ('*Mitwelt*') of inter-*actions*. However, as we shall see below, this representation of the self might still be too simple and too idealistic. For example, the very idea that we can talk about clearly identifiable meanings and accordingly determined identities or selves is challenged by the poststructural tradition to which I now turn.

The poststructural approach

In the eyes of most poststructuralists, drawing on Freud and Nietzsche, the subject is not the main or most relevant origin of action and mostly not the origin at all. Nietzsche described the subject as self-deceptive, lacking in consciousness, wilful, vengeful, and power seeking, while Freud defined the subject as decentred, fragmented, heterogeneous,

and unaware of its unconscious. Following these conceptions, poststructuralists argue that larger internal and external structures and processes, the rules by which large societal systems function—and, predominantly, the broader discourses and power relations within them—determine the social processes and the specific position of the subject in them. In this view or reading of poststructuralism, which is as we shall see below only part of the story, the subject is seen mainly as a subject*ed* individual. It was, for example, Foucault who argued in his earlier work (1979) that the human sciences have produced individuals who, far from being free, have become constituted in various ways so that they are subjected or dominated through what he calls 'bio-power' (1980) and the 'technology of domination' (the ways in which individuals are transformed by others).

However, Foucault analytically distinguishes two main types of technology that human beings use to understand and control themselves and their actions. The first type is called 'technologies of domination' (the ways in which individuals are transformed by others) and the second is called 'technologies of the self' (the ways in which individuals transform themselves). Technologies of domination are concerned with defining and controlling individuals and their conduct, through the exercise of power towards certain ends. Technologies of the self, on the other hand, permit individuals "to effect certain operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being" (1982, page 18), so that they are able to reconstruct and transform themselves. Nevertheless, Foucault's earlier viewpoint culminated in his famous proclamation of the 'death of the subject' (1970). In a critical reading of this aspect of poststructuralist thinking, it is interpreted to mean, that there is no such thing as an autonomous spatial actor as a generator of authentic spatial actions (Booth, 1985; Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1970, pages 261 – 262; Rosenau, 1992, page 46, referring to Baudrillard, 1983, page 167; Wellmer, 1985, pages 436 – 449).[3]

According to that same critical reading, the only way in which poststructuralist thinkers still retain the subject is always in the guise of someone who is very aware of his or her own fictionality. The poststructural subject could then be typified as a relaxed and flexible individual who actively constitutes his or her own social and spatial reality, by pursuing a personal quest for meaning and self-promotion without making truth claims. He or she seeks fantasy, humour, a culture of desire, immediate and personal satisfaction. An attitude of 'live and let live', focused on the here and now, in which the subject feels more comfortable with the spontaneous than with the planned is typical of this floating individual without a strong, singular identity—or, as Rosenau (1992, page 53f) writes, a patchwork person consisting of a multitude of incompatible juxtaposed logics in perpetual movement without possibly ever reaching a permanent resolution or reconciliation, a 'nonidentity', as others have portrayed it.

Indeed, many poststructuralists oppose what they describe as a typical *modern* conception of the subject, as also implied in Werlen's geographic action theory. They deny the self as a centred, sovereign, and coherent rational ego and as an intentional and knowledgeable human agent, capable of spontaneous and volitional (re)actions, of creativity and of cultural innovation, progress, and change.

Among different interpretations of poststructuralism, the poststructural position declaring the dissolution of the subject in the workings of language, power, and desire has become fashionable in current human geographic debates. As elsewhere, it has led to intellectual cleavages, with devout followers and stubborn dissenters on both sides, and to a polarisation characterised by uncritical loyalties, on the one hand, and unfriendly neglect, on the other (Dunn, 1998, page 184). Yet, those who would simply

[3] Some even see a certain resemblance to the positivistic idea of a subject who is fully determined and conditioned by laws operating behind his or her back and is located in the facticity of discourse (Dunn, 1998, page 178).

repudiate poststructuralist theory as mistaken or obstructionist miss the challenge and complexity of poststructuralist arguments while denying the failures of the older philosophy of consciousness. The relocation of the subject within the instabilities of discourse and power does add insight and strength to the political struggles over identity and to the workings of established political, cultural, and scientific authority. At the same time, poststructuralism reconstructed the subject in a newly 'postmetaphysical' and a 'postdualistic' way.

But are these conceptions of the self indeed so incompatible as they seem on first sight? It actually was Foucault in his later writings, in an attempt to answer critics who saw a fatalistic form of determinism in his work on the constitution of the self, who amended his own analysis to include how we can ourselves constitute the self (1988; 1990). Next to the 'technologies of domination', which classify and objectify individuals and insofar as these objectifications are accepted by them, also 'externally' construct their identity, Foucault also distinguished 'technologies of the self', which permit individuals to reconstruct and transform themselves (1982, page 18). This latter technology refers to the ability to distance oneself from the external constructions and tell another 'truth' about oneself. Foucault acknowledges that, just as power is everywhere, it is indissociable from contestation and struggle: "... as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance" (Foucault, 1988, page 123). Subjectivity is thus no longer characterised only as a reified construct of power. But, in contrast to earlier traditions in the philosophy of consciousness, the task is, in Foucault's view, not to discover some kind of essential secret inner being but rather to produce oneself continually in relation to existing discourses and interactions with the environment. We are still situated within power relations, but the main difference is that Foucault sees that individuals also have the power to define their own identity, to master their body and desires, and to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self. "What Foucault now suggests, therefore, is a dialectic between an active and creative agent and a constraining social field where freedom is achieved to the extent that one can overcome socially imposed limitations and attain self-mastery and stylised existence" (Best and Kellner, 1991, page 65). On the one hand, Foucault declares the death of the subject, not on the basis of objectified causal processes, as was the case with behaviour(al)ism but on the basis of the performance and exercise of power. On the other hand, he leaves a trace of room for the subject, although only from the margin.

We are left with a rather ambivalent assertion of the death—and (marginal) life— of the subject. In this situation one can of course ask oneself if it is not exactly this ambivalence which could direct us to some hybrid 'essence' of human existence. In the subsequent section of this contribution I will refer to a conceptualisation of human being which in this sense might indeed give us a glance of what could be next.

Othering the self: eccentric positionality

'Next' could be the exploration of another ontology of the self—one that does not lose itself in the idealism of a classical philosophy of consciousness, and one which provides the human actor with a firm nonmetaphysical foundation: a conception of the origin of spatial actions that does not surrender rationality or the possibility of constructive critique or progress. As an answer to the question 'what next?' I strongly recommend the anthropological contentions of Plessner (1892–1984),[4] who anticipated much of poststructuralist thinking and whose work can be seen as an invitation to bend some of the poststructuralist dilemmas towards an action-theoretical solution, and vice versa.

[4] Only small parts of his voluminous work have been translated into English, although in the course of his 'renaissance' a number of initiatives have been taken to translate central pieces of his work (see the website of the Helmuth Plessner Association at http://www.helmuth-plessner.uni-freiburg.de/index.htm).

Plessner follows the phenomenological method of asking what are the preconditions of the possibility of perceiving objects in the world around us (Fischer, 2000, page 271; Grene, 1966; Haucke, 2000, page 19 – 20)[5] and those of the possibility of human being and human action. In doing so he differentiates between nonliving and living being. For Plessner, nonliving things do not have relations with their environment. They are completely separated from that environment in such a way that they are confined, or bounded, but do not have boundaries or boundary layers. They have only contours that delimit them. They only fill a certain space, but they do not occupy or inhabit that space.

Only living things really *have* boundaries, within which they have a certain degree of independence. Their boundary is an interface and regulatory device for its interdependencies with the environment. Within modern biological systems theory this is described as autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela, 1980). Only through this boundary as property, as a realised relation between the inner and outer system, and as a constitutive part of the physical body does the organism become a living thing.[6] Living organisms do not just take place but have a place, which they actively occupy. And, indeed, this living body is nowadays a crucial object of geographic study[7] as the body is "the geography closest in" (Rich, 1986, page 212). Living things therefore become, change, adapt, and die. They have a beginning and an end. Life is a process and a project. Plessner calls this specific characteristic of living things 'positionality' (note the spatial connotation in his approach). Positionality in this case does not imply a positioning by and only by a thinking subject, as in more idealistic thinking. Rather, this positioning juxtaposes the idealistic 'I' with a self-dynamic 'it' (environment) to which it relates through dynamic bordering. This concept of positionality therefore always relates the inner *and* outer aspects and is thus always more than just a position *in* time and space; it is something which asserts itself *as* time and space (Fischer, 2000, page 275). It constitutes time and space.

Within the class of living organisms Plessner distinguishes between three *ideal* types,[8] corresponding to what are known as 'plants', 'animals', and 'human beings', each having a specific kind of positionality. Let me focus here on the characterisation of human beings in contrast to animals.

The animal lives within its specific environmental niche with which it interacts selectively, but in which it is also functionally imprisoned through its specific stimulus-response mechanisms. It is being driven and it cannot break out. At the same time it is also secure in its niche and does not have to care. The higher degree of closedness of the animal implies also a higher degree of centralised organisation of the organism. The different parts now also clearly have a functional relationship for the organism as a whole and are constitutive of its identity. This central organisation also gives the relationship with the environment a clear direction. The animal develops an intentional directedness towards the environment in the sense of Husserl, but this intentionality

[5] Plessner speaks of the phenomenal 'perceptual thing' (*Wahrnehmungsding*).

[6] This argument echos the contentions of the Dutch biologist Buytendijk (1928) and the Swiss zoologist Portman (1970; 1972; see also Grene, 1968; Müller, 1988; Schröter, 1985). By determining 'life' as having a boundary, Plessner goes beyond the Cartesian dualism (with its either inner or outer world), by means of which one could not come up with an adequate concept of 'life'. At the same time Plessner does not conceptualise life as a stream of energy broken and bounded by the factuality and materiality of our world as in vitalistic philosophy. For him life is possible only through this process of breaking and bounding (Fischer, 2000, page 273).

[7] See, for example, the recent textbook by Valentine (2001, pages 15 – 62), but also Longhurst (1997; 2000), Nast and Pile (1998), or Teather (1999) as well as Pile and Thrift (1995).

[8] As ideal types, they do not exclude any intermediary forms of life.

is not reflexive. It cannot do anything about its own intentions. According to Plessner the animal has consciousness but does not know it has consciousness, it is not conscious of its consciousness.

This is radically different for human beings. In Plessner's argument, human beings live self-consciously, reflexively at a distance from themselves and from the world around them, which they can reach only via their cultures, their languages, and their bodies. Here we recognise the poststructuralist awareness of ones own 'fictionality' mentioned in the foregoing section. Instead of the solely centric life of the animal, the human being lives both eccentrically and centrically. By means of this typical eccentric positionality, the human being is able to negate her or his worldly being and she or he is able to do something about herself or himself. He or she can refuse, resist, destroy, change, make, create, construct himself or herself and the world around. In this ability to say no (or yes) lies the necessity of making choices and of the freedom of will along with an awareness of the contingency and ambivalence of these actions. Here, again, we notice very directly how central this anthropological insight is for both the action-theoretical approach and for poststructuralist approaches.

The concept of eccentric positionality does not imply the reproduction of the classical Cartesian dualism with its separation of bodily existence and human consciousness. On the contrary, it is an essential element of Plessner's theory that these are two sides of the same coin. The human being is structured as both centred and eccentred. This partly reiterates the view of Merleau-Ponty, who stated in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, pages 136, 157) that intentional actions always and inseparably involve both corporeal intentionality as well as intentionality of the mind. The human being is both natural and artificial. In both, however, the human being never fully succeeds and never finds a peaceful home. This is in contrast to the way an animal finds its niche and respective mode of living. Thus the human being restlessly has to keep going, continuing her or his actions. The human existence is that of a 'natural artificiality'. This is just the first binary Plessner deconstructs to emphasise the dialectics[9] of human being. He formulates three constitutional laws:

First, we have the aforementioned law of *natural artificiality*, which suggests that each human being must create and is the creator of his or her own life as compensation for the natural place she or he has lost.

Second, there is the law of *mediated immediacy*, according to which the relation between eccentric human beings and their environment is actively mediated by human corporeality, enabling them to objectify (and subjectify) themselves and the environment—that is, to create a distance between themselves and the environment. Our cognitive consciousness of objects in the world presents an illusion of an unmediated, direct, and objective perception as we forget the mediating role of our senses. The mediatedness of this relation to the environment can be revealed through reflection from the eccentric position. But the bordered body is not just an interface but also a face, an instrument of human expressivity. Human being and human life are essentially and necessarily (inter)active, and again mediated, expressions of oneself, of one's identity as a human being. These expressive actions are bound to the media in which they are realised and through which they are communicated. The self is always already beyond any uttered reason for spatial action, beyond any construction of sense, but also beyond every discursive framing. Every realisation in space and time is a one-sided appearance, merely one aspect of the self, which, as such, always points to the otherness

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[9] Plessner avoids this term in a strict sense, and prefers the term 'dual aspectivity' as this two-sidedness should be associated not with two separate realities which find their synthesis only in a third one, but rather with two simultaneous and inseparable sides of the same being.

of the aspects lacking (Haucke, 2000, page 39). Therefore human beings never know what they are doing and will learn what they have done only through history. This is a radicalisation of the contingency of action and human intentions. In Plessner's view, however, this does not mean that the geographic actor is disempowered. Rather, the notion of this contingency will initiate new actions, linking former ones to future ones and, as such, create an ever-continuing search for sense.

Third, the law of *utopian position* points to our eccentric positionality. From that position we are at a distance to our own physical existence and to our passive experience in a world of praxis. Because of this eccentric positionality every human being experiences his or her 'constitutive rootlessness', which impels him or her to transcend the achieved and thus to keep searching for the unreachable 'home', a position of unambiguous fixation, a place in this world, and a clear identity for the self and the world around it. The eccentric positionality leads to a positioning in a counterfactual utopian home, a kind of "smooth place" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, page 383)[10] or "non-place" (Augé, 1995, page 75f) or perhaps also in a counterfactual ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984). In this manner we experience the traces of the 'other' excluded from our own factual being, doing, and saying. This detachment, which is constitutive of human subjectivity, is also the power of putting oneself in the place of *any* other person, indeed, of any other living thing. Where there is one person, Plessner says, there is every person. The specific particular being, in one's own limited, parochial situation, is a concretion of this utopian generality providing a firm basis for the sociality of human actions in general.

The oppositions in these three anthropological laws declare that we cannot be either/or and that we always have to be both, natural and artificial, immediate and mediated, utopian and concrete.

The future of the geographical subject

In conclusion, we can ask: 'What are the consequences of Helmuth Plessner's conceptualisation for the human geography of today?' The answer to this question is still a field to explore. Nevertheless we can hint at some interesting and promising linkages to both the action-theoretical and the postmodern or poststructuralist programmes within human geography, which might also unveil what could be next in human geographic research.

First, I would like to mention the issue of *progress*. The action-theoretical approach assumes the possibility of *reconstructing* the reasons for certain actions, the sense they make with respect to these reasons and to the situation in which these actions take place. It also assumes that it makes sense to want to reconstruct and thus understand spatial actions retrospectively to learn from them for our future actions. As such, this approach is rooted in the modern view of progress. It assumes that on a certain level of abstraction sociospatial processes repeat themselves, which makes it possible to understand what has happened before from our position now. It is also this continuity which makes it possible to use this knowledge productively in future situations and to formulate intentions sensibly for the future. The poststructuralist Derrida, on the other hand, points to the fact that reconstruction is always based on a re-presentation of what was once perceived as present. As such, it is always also a rewriting of history and therefore there can be no such thing as continuity, and reconstruction seems impossible and senseless. The only thing we can do is *deconstruct* historical processes,

[10] Deleuze and Guattari describe 'smooth space' as a nomad space providing room for vagabondage through simultaneously occurring as a place—in this place. It is a place that is not just *here*, in a pinpointed spot of space, but is in a 'nonlimited locality'. As such, it belongs neither to physical reality nor to the mind. "Nomad space is 'exterior' without being extended, and 'pure' without being imaginary" (Casey, 1997, page 304).

pointing to the contingency of every action and of every attempt to understand them, tracing those other reasons, sense-makings, and meanings which were left out but still present. Instead of progress we should talk of difference or otherness.

Plessner's conceptualisation of the self does not omit the idea of historical development or progress. The law of natural artificiality makes it inevitable that humans create artificial structures in the framework of which it makes sense and becomes possible to accrue one's cultural competences and to speak of progress. In this same framework human beings make (free) choices and take responsibility. At the same time the law of mediated immediacy leads us to the necessity of putting into perspective and deconstructing our actions and their outcomes. On the one hand, then, we have a future-oriented intentionality based on knowledge from the past, and, on the other, we must recognise the contingency of making sense of our spatial actions. In this respect, Plessner (2003, volume 5, page 163) writes: "A new responsibility is being conferred upon mankind ... *to let reality just in spite of its relativity be reality*" (emphasis added).[11] Every action must be understood as *con*struction or production as well as *re*construction or *re*production.[12] The power to which every human being is compelled is in this sense an *over*production, which always must go beyond the foregoing, thus adding something new to the old. At the same time it is a coproduction as other things and other actors always interfere and simultaneously play their own games (Seitter, 1985, page 187, 189). This means that every human being must recognise that he or she is not the (single) cause of his or her spatial actions but that these actions are just realised by the occasion of his or her doing (Plessner, 2003, volume 4, page 310). To be powerful and to exercise the compulsion to use power implies a need to *participate* in productions, which exceed human doing, and which are connected to past productions and directed to future ones. Not every act results in a great work, but under certain conditions it still can have great effects. Whatever its effect, it still is a creative and causal act which makes some sense, even if it is not a unitary sense.[13] By his or her nature, the human being cannot just exist in direct continuation of his or her own self-being, as an expression of an identity that is interior and pregiven. His or her heterogeneity, which consists of different determinations and indeterminations, would deny that. Identity, therefore, is not substantial or essential. Rather, it is a generic construction based on corporeal performances as part of a discursive praxis. Human activities are not externally determined by natural necessity *or* internally determined by a reasoning power to maintain oneself.

Second, I would like to point to the issue of the *pragmatism* of living identities. Poststructuralist thinkers broadly see "the world as heterogeneous, composed of a vast plurality of interpretation in which knowledge and truth are contingent and therefore ultimately undecidable. In this world, identity is inherently decentred and fluid because constituted in unstable relations of difference" (Dunn, 1998, page 175). In this way everything becomes a question of interpretation and defers to the rule of power over the frames for interpretation. As an answer to the metaphysics of the philosophy of purely mental consciousness the subject is thus turned into the subjectified. However, this postmetaphysical endeavour is also shared by other traditions of thought, which localise the subject in pragmatics of interaction with the environment and more specifically in the intersubjectivity of communicative interpersonal relationships. Here the work of

[11] Eßbach (1994, page 40) notes that this formulation of Plessner corresponds to Derrida's interpretation of 'crossing out'. Under the erasure the presence of a transcendental signified disappears and is still readable.

[12] Derrida (1982, page 318) in this respect speaks of 'citationality' and 'iterability': the imminent repetition of the structure of signification.

[13] It was Derrida (1972) who once claimed that the production of sense necessarily implies the production of non-sense, where there is no unity of sense but only dissemination.

the behaviourist and social pragmatist George Herbert Mead, the language pragmatics of Habermas but also the neopragmatics of Rorty (1989) and others are relevant (see also Rehberg, 1985). As is the case with the poststructuralists and Plessner, they are all exemplary of a postmetaphysical endeavour. Both Plessner and Mead point to the reciprocity of perspectives as the typical aspect of human relations with the social environment. Mead and Habermas derive this reciprocity from language and other symbolic gestures, whereas Plessner derives it from the eccentric positionality of the human being (Habermas, 1987, page 140) and the law of utopian position. However, according to the law of mediated immediacy every human being is urged to engage in expressive actions, and at that moment the pragmatics of Mead and Habermas become significant. Only through the performative acts, gestures, and desires as corporeal significations and expressions on the surface of the body can an effective identification take place (Butler, 1990, page 336). Like Plessner, Butler describes this concrete discursive praxis as contextually and pragmatically restricted and hence to a certain degree inherently unsuccesful, unsatisfactory, and unauthentic. There is an enduring tension between the unavoidable performative pragmatism of active expressive identification and the incomprehensibility of the eccentrically positioned human being, which compels every human being to keep on going, to keep trying, to continue to act, to seek power, to go on making sense of the world and of oneself, to adhere to the pragmatics of life, and to keep on living.

Whereas some poststructuralist scholars see this indeterminacy as weakness in which the subject disappears and loses its causal power in the face of the external constructive power of current discourses, Plessner as well as the social pragmatists such as Mead see in the experience of contingency the emergence of the powerful subject.

Third, I would like to underscore the consequences of Plessner's contentions for the conceptualisation of *space* and of *spatial identities*. Just as in the example of the innovative potential of Plessner's conceptualisation of the geographic self, I point to the attractiveness and topicality of his work within the framework of the latest and future technological and cultural developments for overcoming space and distance: although, for example, for both Plessner and the poststructuralists the body as spatial existence disciplines human being, it was Plessner who at the same time conceived the human being in his or her eccentric positionality as simultaneously outside that space. In accordance with the law of natural artificiality the human being seeks to overcome this situation by means of his or her active creations: culture and technology. The world of technology and culture is thus an expression of the human desire to bridge the distance which separates the human being from the world, from other human beings, and from himself or herself (de Mul, 1995). As such, culture and technology limit and enable us to be and to become what we are, to take and receive an identity, and to take 'place'. On the one hand, we see that new technologies such as simulation, tele-presence, and virtual reality enhance our awareness of being able to transcend our own corporeal existence in an eccentric position to the extreme. Thus, Plessner's ideal-typical categorisation in which the human being is typified as being in an eccentric position might be extended by another evolutionary quality of eccentricity in the direction of cyborgs or even total robotic existence, where the natural body is transformed step-by-step into a robotic one. This as yet hypothetical option would further increase our ability to create a spatial identity and would maybe even enable the creation of a multiplicity of artificial spatial identities. On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that the double aspectivity of human being is unchanged and we will intrinsically be linked to a bodily existence.[14] Therefore this should not be misunderstood as a Cartesian phantasy.

[14] Indeed, Plessner's conceptualisations do play an important role in the philosophy of human technology and medical ethics.

What is described here as a technological development is also recognisable in cultural-historic development in general and in emerging postmodern times. From human beings' eccentric position and through their equipment with these technological and cultural tools, space and time are to be perceived not as simply given (as Kantian or neo-Kantian transcendental forms of judgment preceding every empirical experience) but rather as technically, socially, and historically produced (Spreen, 2002). The spatial identity of the self is then to be conceived of as a node, as a dynamic equilibrium in a network of relations, as a space of flows (Castells, 1996; 1997; 1998).

These are just a few hints for further thought, but what does this new ontology of the geographic self mean for our theoretical position and practical research tomorrow? Let me list just a few aspects:

1. Action-theoretical contentions can be *combined* with poststructural insights, through a renewed postmetaphysical and postdualistic conceptualisation of the spatiality of the actor and his or her actions.

2. Spatial decisions of individuals as well as of enterprises, state-governmental and nongovernmental organisations, and their spatial identities are to be conceived as contingent, subjective, and inherently unsuccessful but still as positive attempts to make *sense* of the world and of ourselves. Identities are never totally fixed nor totally fluid.

3. Individuals do not just have a place but actively *take* (a) place and *make* (a) place. As such they also have a special responsibility for the development of that place. Whereby

4. Therefore, social and spatial pragmatics determine the dynamic success and failure of these actions. The criteria for this pragmatic success are rooted both in the facticity as well in the counterfacticity of the eccentric position.

5. In analysing these action processes we should utilise both deconstructive and reconstructive methods.

6. In doing so we inescapably have to be *critical* and self-critical, while at the same time we need to recognise plurality and be open to otherness.

This sounds very much like the quadrature of the circle, but this multiaspectivity, without being dialectic, is probably one of the most important lessons to be learned from the action-theoretical and poststructuralist approaches.

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