

Critical geography in post-modern times

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Abstract

This contribution is dedicated to Associate Prof. dr. Ton van Naerssen - a highly esteemed member of the Department of Human Geography at the Radboud University Nijmegen who is retiring this year. He became a member of the department during the turbulent early seventies (1973), as a strong representative of, at that time, the emerging radical and critical geography approach which focussed on creating a better world, especially for those in developing countries. During the many years that he continued his research at the department and educated many new young scholars, he also experienced the turn of the tide from the 'classical', mainly Marxist inspired radical approach, towards the critical approach of today which is much more inspired by post-structural thinking. In this contribution I will try to look back at these developments and changes, and try to ask myself how one can still be critical today?

1. Introduction

Many young academics, having their first research experiences in the field of human geography, often struggle with finding a suitable theoretic framework for their research. One part of this struggle is the ambition to make their research matter in a practical, societal context (Massey, 1984). How can one derive practically and politically relevant conclusions from one's own research? From this perspective, it often does not seem to be enough to just understand current practices. It is also felt as a necessity to make some kind of recommendations for change to create a better future, or at least have the feeling that one's research leads to something. This ambition is usually deeply rooted in the motivational structure of human geographers, even if they are not always very explicit about it. Human geographers, somehow, tend to want to improve the world, to put their understanding of the world to some use. It is therefore also no coincidence that human geography has always been closely linked to different realms of applied science. This has always been a very strong tradition in geography, especially in the Netherlands². On the one hand, this practical ambition can be associated with a critical stance towards existing societal practices. This critical attitude is also the basis of what is called 'critical geography' (Bauder & Engel-Di Mauro, 2008³). On the other hand, the close relationship between applied research and powerful external principals, is sometimes also seen as direct threat for a free critical attitude in research (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004).

Another part of the struggle of finding a suitable theoretical framework is linked with the multitude of different theoretical approaches one can choose from, and the lack of own experience with most of them. In recent times it has often been claimed that there are no dominant research paradigms anymore (Feyerabend, 1975), that we live in a multi-paradigmatic world (Weichhart, 2000) and that we lack specific criteria on how to choose a suitable approach for one's own research. Increasingly theoretic approaches are irrational scientific fads rather than that they are reflected and deliberate choices. As fashions they are the children of their times (Peet, 1998). In the current 'postmodern' times this seems to be

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² For a more historic overview of the development and different approaches in Dutch human geography see also (Ernste, forthcoming).

³ See also: ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies: www.acme-journal.org

more so than ever before. Under these circumstances many young scholars choose their specific theoretical approach on the basis of the (unreflected) inspiration they get from these approaches or the social acceptance they can gain from it. And who would blame them? Only if one experiences the changes of time, and the related changes in fashions and approaches one can seriously look back and consciously reflect on the specific differences and similarities between these approaches and on the historical contingencies of their fate.

From this perspective, I briefly would like to reflect, in this contribution, on how to be critical and how to make human geography matter in the current, postmodern times. I will roughly follow the development of critical geography from its early beginnings to its current state in postmodern times, and loosely add my personal reflective comments and questions to it. Finally I will derive some personal conclusions on how it is possible to be constructively critical today and in the future. Maybe this can even serve as source of inspiration for young scholars searching for their theoretical position on the research questions they face.

2. The origins of critical thinking

In the 1970s, two new approaches, behavioural geography and humanistic geography, of which the latter subsequently formed the basis of the action-theoretical approach in human geography (Werlen, 1992), emerged as a direct critique of the spatial analysis approach which was developed in the years before. Spatial analysis was inspired by a positivist and empiricist approach in human geography and focussed on the explanation and representation in quantitative models of aggregate patterns in space and in spatial interaction. Spatial analysis, as such, is largely abstracted from individual human behaviour and human actions which might play a role behind these spatial patterns. Both behavioural geography and action-theoretic geography gave primacy to human agency - although each in a different way - rather than to aggregate patterns of flows and human activities. The first adhered to the positivist approach but focussed on individual human behaviour and the cognitive information processing mechanism behind it. The spatial situation in which people behave was still seen as the main stimulus for and the main structural force behind spatial human behaviour. The second, however, was much more inspired by phenomenological and existential philosophy and assumed the origin of spatial human action and experience in human intentionality, instead of only in the situation. In this view the individual human being is perceived as a self-directing, creative force. For the action theoretic approach in human geography, society and all its spatial patterns is the sum of individual decisions and choices.

Soon both behavioural and humanistic geography were criticised, from a more structuralist perspective because they supposedly failed to take into account the material context in which human actions took place. Structuralism in general claimed that individual activities could only be understood with reference to impersonal social forces and to rules and logic of (hidden) social structures in society. Within the social sciences this structuralist approach found its origin in the work of Durkheim, Comte, Montesquieu, Althusser, Lévy Strauss and foremost in the work of the (Swiss) linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1966)⁴. It aimed to

⁴ Saussure claimed that, at that time, the conventional view of language as a neutral medium for representing the world was wrong. Traditionally the meaning of a word was determined by the relation this word had to a specific concept in human mind, which in turn would derive its meaning from the correspondence to the existence of an object in the real world. In contrast Saussure conceptualised language as a complex system of signs whose meanings lie in the arbitrary relationship between different signs. So words and concepts get their meaning in the particular ways in which they differ from other words and concepts in a specific language system. Meanings are thus not fixed but based on social constructions and conventions about these relationships. The meaning of the word 'man' is, for example, not determined by any intrinsic properties that summon up the concept, but rather because it contrasts to the way the word

discover the universal laws that govern the functioning of social forms and which are founded in unconscious mental structures. It was proposed, that ‘underlying the social surface, with its seeming contingency, randomness, and individual freedom, are universal structures that operate independently of individual will to create order and social coherence. Indeed, the self or individual is, in this perspective, little more than a vehicle for the unconscious structural codes to enact their logic’ (Seidman, 1998, p. 218).

It is often forgotten, that these intellectual perspectives also have a history and a geography of themselves (Blomley, 2008). In this case, for example, the structuralist movement is strongly rooted in the French context. Parallel to a nationally centralised government and power structure, the French intellectual culture is also centred around a few great universities and research centres led by dominant general ‘patron-scholars’, as Seidman (1998, p.214) calls them, who are expected to draw on a broad (disciplinary overarching) scientific body of knowledge in order to engage in social and political developments. Intellectual debates in the French culture have, therefore, always been strongly politicised and focussed on the cultural conflict between a more humanistic and structuralist world view. The typical French focus on the structuralised aspects of daily life can be understood from its specific French institutional context. Even the short upturn of humanistic and existentialist approaches in the after WWII, inspired by the war resistance movement, can be explained as the reconstruction of national pride and structural power (Kurzweil, 1980). Structuralism gave expression to a particular French view of the world at that time. General de Gaulle promised neither reform nor revolution but rather a stable growth-oriented society focussed on rebuilding the economy and national culture. In addition, the emerging super-powers of the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to offer few possibilities beyond manoeuvring within a fixed structural framework. ‘With the heroic spirit of existentialism dimming and with the revelations of the horrors of Stalinism dampening the ideological [and revolutionary (*HE*)] vigour of the French Communist Party, structuralism took central stage’ (Seidman, 1998, p. 219).

Without taking into account the implicit historical and geographical contingencies of this kind of thinking, in practice, geography picked up several ideas from a wide variety of these structural thinkers. Foremost, the historical materialist thinkers - Marx, Althusser and Lefebvre - played an important role. They proposed that the world can only be understood with reference to the historically unfolding political and economic relations that structure social life. Accordingly, the world is shaped by deep structures of capitalism in which class relations reproduce and sustain people’s behaviour and are the driving forces of history. Short (Hubbard et al., 2002, p. 44): the prevailing mode of production of material life [the (economic) structural base, *HE*] determines the general character of the social, cultural, political and other processes of life [the (cultural) superstructure, *HE*]. Thus Marx thought that it is not people’s consciousness that determine their being but, on the contrary, the social-economic being that determines their consciousness. ‘For Marx, there is no such thing as an individual human nature – the kind of person one is and the kind of things one does are determined by the kind of society in which one lives. This theory is inherently *teleological*, in the sense that it sees events as stages in the movement towards a preordained (and socially just) future, and *functional* in the sense that it subsumes the individual to the logic of the capitalist system’. This capitalist system was based on the unequal (power) relations between the bourgeois owners of the means of production and the exploited proletariat. On the one hand, the class of labourers was responsible for creating the added wealth, or surplus value, through their labour. On the other hand, this crucial contribution also put them in a position to collectively bring down the capitalist system and make it inherently unstable. These kind of class differences also had a clear spatial aspect,

‘woman’ is used. Thus, language systems are dynamic, social structures which shape our thinking, our saying and our doing. From this structural point of view, society can be seen as a kind of super-language (Seidman, 1998, pp. 216-218).

separating the elite from the exploited and making capitalism into an imperialist enterprise securing the continuing supply of cheap labour (Harvey, 1982; Castree, 1999).

By the identification of class differences and the inherent alienation of the labourers as a driving force of modern capitalism, Marxist inspired structuralism also contains a clear humanist and critical thrust. It defined human beings as structurally seeking liberation from alienating labour conditions and striving towards developing and unfolding human capacities and creative potentials (Ollman, 1976). As such, structural Marxism focussed on the emancipation of the proletariat and on a critique of existing capitalist structures. But at the same time, it also assumed capitalist structures and the way towards full emancipation as pre-given and following an ‘iron law’:

‘History is an immense *natural-human* system in movement, and the motor of history is class struggle. History is a process, and a *process without a subject*. The question about how “*man* makes history” disappears altogether. Marxist theory rejects it once and for all; it sends it back to its birthplace: bourgeois ideology⁵’ (Althusser, 1976, pp. 83-84, quoted in Peet, 1998, p. 123).

Or as Kevin Cox (2005, p. 21) paraphrased Karl Marx: ‘People make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing’.

3. Critical theory and critical geography

Critical theory, in general, and critical geography, in particular, were formulated in the early 1970s as a direct response to structural theories of those days. ‘Critical theory as developed by the original Frankfurt School attempted to explain why the socialist revolution prophesied in the mid-nineteenth century by Marx did not occur as expected’ (Agger, 1991, p. 107). Representatives of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, tried to develop a new understanding of capitalism which would take into account the transformed situation in the emerging twentieth century (Horkheimer, 1972). They thought that capitalism was developing coping mechanisms, against its own contradictory powers and against a possible proletarian uprising, thus continuing and reinforcing its domination in modern society. In their eyes, this domination was based on a combination of external exploitation and internal self-disciplining of the labour class. People internalise certain values and norms that induce them to participate effectively in the capitalist system. More concretely, people believe that they can achieve modest individual improvement in their situation by complying with certain social norms, which, at the same time, make more structural social changes less probable. They thus exchange their substantive interests in liberation of exploitative relations for the freedoms of consumer choice. In today’s terms if people can enjoy the purchase of the newest iPhone and cheap flight to the Maldives, they will continue to play their role in the capitalist system. The critical school thus identified a number of cultural, political and ideological mechanisms which stabilised and even deepened the dominance of the capitalist system. They held the combination of the enlightenment ideology with the positivist ideology particularly responsible for this increasing dominance by the system (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). While enlightenment helped to demystify the structural powers of religion and mythology, it also made the positivist science into a new mythology and ideology in the sense that through this new ‘religion’ people everywhere are taught to accept the world ‘as it is’, as a quasi objective scientific fact, instead of what it *could* be. Positivism suggested that one can perceive the world without questioning the assumptions about the phenomena under observation and thus that knowledge simply represents the world as it is. Positivist thinking leads to an uncritical identification of reality and rationality, and to the inability to view the world in terms of its potential for being changed, beyond simplistic

⁵ The term ‘ideology’ as used here resembles the currently more fashionable term ‘discourse’ in the sense that it is seen as a system of ideas and representations and a system of meanings that dominate people’s minds, their thinking and doing.

and reduced patterns and cause-and-effect relationships (Jay, 1973). Even Marxist theory, in the eyes of the Frankfurt School, was, in that sense, too positivist and too reductionist and failed 'to secure an adequate ground in voluntarism, instead falling back on the fatalism of positivist determinism' (Agger, 1991, p. 110). In contrast to structural Marxism, the Frankfurt School concluded that human beings make their own history, instead of being exclusively subjectified by the structural capitalist mode of production.

A further important step forward was made by the second generation Frankfurt School critical thinker Jürgen Habermas (1984) who tried to reconstruct critical theory to find a better balance between the (positivist) knowledge gained from causal analysis and knowledge gained from critical self-reflection. He acknowledged that next to the anthropologically deep seated technical interests in domination of nature and the material reproduction other practical interests also play an important role in any human practice (Peet, 1998, p. 92), namely socio-cultural reproduction, especially through the mechanism of intersubjective understanding⁶. He thus conceptualised the process of rationalisation in a much broader way, comprising not only technical-instrumental, but also moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive dimensions of rationalisation. Rationality, conceived in this way, would then also bear the potential for critical reflection and would also enhance and extend the project of modernity, towards a better future. In his theory of communicative rationality, making use of theory of speech acts, he also detailed the ideal-typical but *contra-factual* societal mechanisms of communicative rationalisation of these different kinds of knowledge⁷. In doing so, he shifted the focus of critical theory, from a more substantive and essentialistic view on differences within society to a more procedural view on the mechanisms to criticise and reconcile these differences (Zierhofer, 2002). Habermas thus shifts critical social theory from the paradigm of consciousness to the paradigm of communication, as in all Western philosophy, enabling workable strategies of ideology-critique, community building and social-movement formation (Agger, 1991, p. 110). The task of critical theory then is to critically look at the *real* processes, and explain why and how they divert from the communicative rational ideal and criticise them from this procedural point of view. In this way Habermas did not only offer a broad theory of society, but also a vision of a good society and a template for constructive critique of oppressive practices. Nevertheless, no specific societal classes or positions are privileged in Habermas' critical theory and the historical and geographical contextuality of the different frames of knowledge are recognised.

Again, we can notice that the critical theory of the Frankfurt school is closely related to the historical and geographical conditions in Germany. Their focus on the human agency, instead of on societal structures, can be traced back to German idealism and (neo-)Kantian traditions (Therborn, 1978, pp. 88-89), but, especially for the second generation Frankfurt School scholars, such as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas is also rooted in the catastrophic experience of the Second World War in Germany, which made clear that, in the interest of humanitarian values, there is and must be space for critical resistance against the overwhelming power of fascist political institutions (Reese-Schaefer, 1990). In the face of these experiences it is almost seen as ethically reprehensible and irresponsible to assume the 'death of the subject' and, on the contrary, a moral obligation to search for ways through which a better world could be created peacefully. At this point the scholars of the Frankfurt School continued to rely on the central idea of 'rationality' as formulated and

⁶ As I have shown elsewhere, it can be argued that these additional aspects of human practice are also firmly anthropologically rooted (Ernste, 2004).

⁷ It is important here to acknowledge that Jürgen Habermas never assumed that this communicative rational ideal actually existed. He only noticed that empirically, human beings to a certain degree in their inter-actions, always *assume* this communicative rational ideal while in reality many disturbing factors occur. This ideal-typical framework, however, makes it possible to reflect critically on this real situation and to identify the real causes of systemic domination of the one-sided technical and economic rationality in capitalistic societies.

identified as a core concept in the capitalist system by Max Weber (1978, 1958) in a German idealist fashion. Taking this contextuality into account, one could of course ask in how far these theoretical viewpoints – the French structuralism and the German idealism – although formulated as universal grand narratives, should not instead be valued from their respective contexts as small and local narratives. ‘To be “critical” means different things in different places’ (Blomley, 2008, p. 290).

With Jürgen Habermas’ non-essentialistic critical theory, a step was also made in the direction of what Joe Painter (2000) designates as a more pluralistic critical human geography, which shares not only the interests of Marxist geography in relations of inequality and oppression, but also includes many other kinds of oppression, which do not need to be of a material nature (Cox, 2005, p. 6). In general, one could characterise critical geography as the endeavour not just to understand the world from a geographical perspective, but to also change it by combining science and politics⁸. This kind of critical geography is often differentiated from applied forms of geography that uncritically serve the interests of the state or business (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004, p. 5; Pain, 2006, p. 253). The emergence of these critical approaches is closely related to the political and social changes that occurred at that time. The post-war social calm abruptly came to an end in Paris in May 1968 when student revolts ignited a sweeping cultural shift, in which moderate democratisations of traditional institutions did not suffice anymore. It was a general revolt against any kind of authority. A totally different kind of society was demanded. This was not limited to universities and students were soon also supported by blue-colour workers which resulted in a general strike on May 13. As a consequence, France came to a virtual standstill⁹. Although the revolt ended quickly, the cultural movement it ignited continued in vigour and developed critical perspectives on consumerism, sexuality, gender, the typical middle-class family life, environmental degradation, third-world famine, colonialism, the cold-war, etc. etc.. After 1968 France was no longer the same. In addition, new theories of society were needed. Social activism and the experience of fast changing institutions and cultural values made structuralism look irrelevant. Existentialism lacked a convincing social and political theory. Althusser’s Marxism neglected all the differences which were not class based (Seidman 1998, p. 220-221).

Although France was one of the main hot spots of this movement and as we will see further below it also invoked a typically French response, this movement also spread across many other Western countries. It was against this backdrop that human geographers were increasingly dissatisfied and demanded that geography come up with a much more relevant contribution to the many social problems. Geography should matter! However, ‘[...] geography at the time appeared to be populated by practitioners who were constructing models and theories in splendid ignorance of the problems of those living in the world beyond the “ivory towers” of academia’ (Hubbard et al., 2002, p. 46). In this situation, the focus shifted from the pre-given determining material side of society to culture as an autonomously shifting and unstable system of meanings through which people make sense of the world. Similar to Habermas’ insights, culture is not seen as the dependent of economic processes anymore, but as the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987, p. 95 quoted in Hubbard et al., 2002, p. 60). Critical geography was not limited to the examination of the role of capital in shaping society anymore, but focussed on a whole series of different dimensions of power and difference, which are held responsible for all kinds of social, economic and spatial differences. In this guise, critical geography subordinates the economic to the cultural and the material to the ideal, as well as structure to agency.

⁸ For more extensive definitions and debates about them, see also the special issue of *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Vol. 16, No. 3.

⁹ In the United States, these movements found much sympathy and also a general discontent was felt but took much more the form of an Anti-Vietnam movement.

Fragmentation in society, according to Kevin Cox (2002, p. 7-8), is now assumed to take a different form: 'The particularities of context, combined with the will to power, forms the humus for the construction of distinct social worlds, for Difference, and the identification of seemingly multiple Others to exclude and marginalise'. Exploitation, he continues, as well as any practices of exclusion and discursive construction of others, is not seen as a necessary feature of capitalism, but as typical features of particular places at particular times, depending on the circumstances. As such, critical geography lacks a unitary theoretical framework and almost dissolves in the genuine but rather non-critical general interest of geographers in processes of spatial differentiation. This development coincides with the development of the typically French post-structuralist thinking to which I will turn in the following section.

Critical theory in post-modern times

The development of post-structural theories was directly related to the upsurge in the late 1960s in France. As Seidman (2002) convincingly shows the post-structural thinkers emphasised rebellion and deconstruction rather than social construction: 'Like their activist counterparts on the barricades of the streets of Paris, these Parisian intellectuals offered few proposals for a good society beyond slogans and rhetoric' (p. 221). In the same way, it is difficult to identify a coherent post-structural theory of society. What is usually designated as post-structuralism is a rather eclectic collection of theoretical positions, of which most authors would not even identify themselves as post-structuralist. Post-structuralism, as it developed in France, was clearly rooted in French structuralism and some would even say that it actually is its consistent extension (Frank, 1989; Münker & Roessler, 2000, p. ix). Post-structuralism, for example, shares with structuralism a strong anti-humanism. The autonomous, rational self is replaced by discursive structures without a subject or agent. In the post-structuralist view, it is language which forms individual subjectivity, social institutions and the political landscape. Meanings are derived from relations of difference and contrast in the dominant discourse. Similar to the classical structuralist approach, society is explained by reference to (discursive) structures which can not be changed by an agent in a deliberate way. People are thus determined by prevailing societal structures¹⁰. However, post-structuralist thinking clearly differs from the classical structuralist approach in the sense that they do not assume a fixed and universal structure to exist. On the contrary, they emphasise that discursive structures are inherently unstable, unremittingly on drift, and dependent on the specific historical and geographical context¹¹. This contingency and subjectivity of discursive structures also makes it highly political and contested. While in structuralism one would try to discover the general social structures, without examining its political implications, in post-structuralism it is exactly the political dimension of the establishment of discursive meanings, which are of central interest. Derrida (1976), for example, claimed that 'whenever a linguistic and social order is said to be fixed or meanings are assumed to be unambiguous and stable, this should be understood less as a disclosure of truth than as an act of power, the [implicit] capacity of a social group to impose its will on others by freezing linguistic and cultural meanings' (Seidman, 2002, p. 222). For example, the way one thought about immigration and integration in the 1970s in the Netherlands was not something of one's choosing, but was at that time 'in the air' and

¹⁰ Most post-structuralist thinkers, similar to structural-functionalist theorists such as Parsons and Luhmann, see the subject as vanishing in the self-governing technical and semiotic relational networks. In our current media dominated world the subject is lost in the ecstasy of communication and is imploding into the masses (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 128). Jameson (1984) characterises the subject as fragmented, disjointed and discontinuous, while Deleuze and Guattari (1987) celebrate the schizoid, nomadic dispersions and finally the pulverisation of the modern subject.

¹¹ The post-structuralist thinkers agreed with Saussure (see footnote 3) that meanings are determined by relations of difference, but in contrast to structuralism, assume that these meanings are not fixed but are in constant flux.

determined how people reacted to foreigners and how integration was institutionalised. Looking back, one would now characterise this as the ‘multi-culti’ age. Today, a totally different political regime seems to rule, in which immigrants are comparatively more marginalised and ‘multi-cultural society’ is seen as a curse (Scheffer, 2000; 2007). According to post-structural thinkers this is not to be seen as the result of a rational process of deliberation but rather as the effect of shifting discursive meanings, which determine one’s thinking and doing. The subject, in their view, is to be conceptualised as radically de-centred and seems to disappear in discursive relations (Zima, 2000).

Post-structuralism aims not so much at construction of social order, but rather at deconstructing seemingly closed patterns of meaning, and linked social orderings by uncovering its ambiguities, its contingency and by tracing it back to a will for power. As such, this was a strategy of subversion of any kind authority and discursive force. On the one hand, it thus carries a strong critical surge. On the other hand deconstruction is not a project of reversing the value or position of discursively marginalised social groups. It only questions the validity of any kind of hierarchy and authority. Derrida e.g. never formulated a social and moral vision that could guide the deconstructive project. Deconstruction therefore remains a very limited critical strategy as it does not really aim to change hierarchical societal structures. This is also the basis of Habermas’ critique of post-structuralism. He accuses it of being inherently conservative (Frank, 2005; Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 246f; Wolin, 1987) because it lacks any criteria for making choices and thus for igniting a transformation of reality. ‘The critical spirit of post-structuralism is not joined to a positive liberationist programme’ (Saidman, 2002, p. 225). The post-structural project, as Lyotard (1984, p. xxv) states, is mainly aimed at disrupting traditional or totalising conceptual meanings and conceptual innovation. Its value lies neither in producing liberating truths nor socially useful knowledge, but rather in making people more aware of differences, ambiguities, uncertainties and conflicts. It therefore ‘refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable’¹². Many critical thinkers would say that this is too shallow to serve as a critical project which aims at improving the fate of those who are oppressed or dominated. The repudiation of humanism by post-structuralist thinkers, without reconstructing its core values, strips the subject of any moral responsibility and autonomy and makes a moral language in the interest of repressed people impossible. Political action then can also not be legitimised (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 291). Of the many post-structuralist thinkers only Laclau and Mouffe seem to have attempted to reconstruct a liberal politics, although it is uncertain whether their approach strengthens liberal capitalism or radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

In this brief contribution I could not go into more detail although there is much more to say on the subject. In general one can conclude that post-structuralism has great difficulties in formulating a positive notion of the social, of community or solidarity, and post-structuralism also seems to lack an adequate theory of agency, of an active creative self, mediated by social institutions, discourses and other people (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 283). This makes it difficult to keep up critical attitudes without becoming entangled in all kinds of contradictions (Weichhart, 2008). For practical critical geography as far these issues are concerned, have hardly seemed to be a real problem which is, as stated in the introduction of this contribution, probably due to a lack of reflection and to a rather selective-eclectic human geographic praxis (Gelbmann & Mandl, 2002) in which not the whole post-structuralist theoretic building is taken on board or taken in full-consequence but rather

¹² In this respect, despite the dismissal of the subject, most post-structuralist theory is highly subjectivistic. They privilege a subjective politics of performativity, spontaneism and anarchism, which fits the events of May 1968 in Paris. They celebrate desire, fragmentation, and libidinal ways of being while disqualifying intersubjectivity, reason, social identity, and harmony (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 290).

only parts of it as a kind of selective-tool-box for critical analyses (Gibson-Graham, 2000). This, however, as I have tried to show in all its brevity, also leaves many flaws and contradictions which are still to be solved. It will be up to our human geography students of the future to further explore the possibilities of a deepened debate about the possibilities to critically make geography matter and to look for what is next, after post-structural geography (Dixon & Jones III, 2004) and it will be the task of critical geographers such as Ton van Naerssen, to teach them, how to do so.

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