

A MAP OF GEOGRAPHY

Introduction

You may have come across a series of cartoons that claim to mark major events in the life of our discipline, personified as a hapless female figure, “Geographia” [Figure 1]. First, back around 1970, she was shown being abducted over the *fluvius calculus* by a brutish character labelled “Quantifactus”. Later, she appeared again in a matching situation — except now the abduction is across the *Rio del Compromiso* and the brute is “El Barbo”, a guerilla of evident Marxist persuasion [Figure 2]. In a recent turn-about the lady got back at her oppressors [Figure 3], but all in all this approach seems gratuitously sexist, and just barely geographical.

In its place I propose: a map. What better than a map, rather than an anthropomorphized cartoon, to show the relative location of philosophic positions [Figure 4]? Of course, perceptual maps of this sort are not universal: that is, each person must create their own. However, the odds are good that for most of you such maps will turn out to be broadly similar to this one.

On it, two principal territories are labeled: on the left (with some malice aforethought) is “Idealand” and opposite, on the right, is “Empirica”. Within these there are particular localities in which geography is done somewhat differently, though still in a manner more like that in other parts of the same half of the terrain than it is like the work done across the *River of Numbers*.

Dimensions on the Philosophic Map

As is the case with most perceptual maps, commonplace dimensions and units of measure do not apply here. Instead of units for X, Y and Z, we end up using terms that are quite obscure and ugly. For now it should be enough to suffer just two of them: *epistemology* and *ontology*. These are the main attribute dimensions for the terrain on my map of our discipline.

EPISTEMOLOGY refers to the initial, right-from-the-start assumptions you make about the root matter of *knowing*: [Figure 5]

- what events and objects may be accepted as trustworthy *evidence* of knowing?
- what *procedures* for the gathering of evidence will reliably yield knowing, and not confusion?
- what sorts of things *can be known*; or conversely, where are the limits of the *unknowable*?

ONTOLOGY refers to the just-mentioned 'things':

- what are the *entities*, the 'pieces of the universe', that you claim to be able to know?
- what are the *criteria* that you use to distinguish entities from non-entities?
- to put it another way: how do you pick apart a universe in which ‘everything is connected to everything else’ so as to yield bits that a human brain can justifiably claim to know and understand, without corrupting the evidence in the process?

A Reconnaissance Trip Across the Map

As I have made out the landscape, there exist two broad territories or 'empires' with differing views on epistemology and ontology (an ontological assertion in itself).

In IDEALAND, the *idealists* claim that humans' body senses (sight, sound, pressure, heat, smell) and the brain connected to them are not capable of connecting to evidence from *all* of the reality of the universe — whatever that is. Out in the extreme corner of this region are the *solipsists*, who do not trust sense experience at all and so are confined to the belief that the universe exists only in their imagination (or might as well, for all they can tell). They tend to be confined in other ways, too.

Less extreme parts of Idealand are less easy to laugh at, supposing you have noticed that your senses do have limited abilities, and so does your brain. *Structuralists*, for instance, assert that there exist patterns (or structures) of organization, especially in matters of human social behaviour, that limit the range of possible events and yet are in no way directly to be sensed.

Some structuralists label themselves *Marxists* because they accept Karl Marx' assertion that the material conditions of human existence plus specific social structures — *class*, in particular — direct the flow of events in time, at least for people. For the moment let's leave closer examination of idealism to later and move our reconnaissance to the other side: *Empirica*.

Those who dwell in *Empirica* assert that the above-mentioned senses, hooked to enough intellect, *are* able to connect with whatever it is the universe is made of. The extreme *positivist* district is inhabited by those who say that the *one and only* way to know the stuff of the universe is through human sense experience. You may have heard that *empiricism* and *materialism* — the ontological assertion that *only* material entities exist — name a single place on the philosophical map. Look closely, though, and you will note that materialism is a swamp that overlaps both empires. Marxists see themselves as "historical materialists".

Physical geographers pretty clearly prefer the Empirical Empire. They also tend not to enjoy bothering with philosophical fine points. So long as they focus on material things with simple behaviours, that preference leads to no problems. But how about the parts of the material universe that seem to be 'chaotic': say, air or water in turbulent motion, or the shapes of coastlines? The most radical of recent movements in the study of material objects is as much philosophical as mathematical: *chaos theory* or *nonlinear system dynamics* not only leaps the old barrier of single-line mathematical functions, it also upsets the old 'self-evident' assertion that simple events come from simple causes and vice versa. Where is all that on my map? Missing: I haven't yet located it, though surely it must overlap the central *River of Numbers*.

The majority of human geographers have lately learned to use numbers and symbolic grammars as often, if not as effectively, as their physical counterparts. They are, by and large, put off by philosophizing just a little less than are physical geographers. Some of them even play (at their peril) out on the Ideal Plain. It isn't the water of the *River of Numbers*, nor is it the mathematical plumbing that the water is made to follow, that makes a major difference in human geography: it's the epistemic *goal*. Which do you

wish to claim: *explanation*, or *understanding*? The former assumes causes, effects, and an 'outsider' who knows (or at least might eventually know) all of their connections. The latter assumes causes, effects, and an 'insider' who resonates with their connection by becoming part of it. This latter sort of knowing, the *hermeneutic* mode, may seem to be newly discovered but has been available to us at least since Vidal de la Blache's *geographie humaine* back in the early 1900s.

One special assertion, that the scientific method is the private property of empiricists, materialists, and positivists, is out-and-out false no matter who proposes it. I shall close with evidence that this latter is a valid assertion, no matter where or on whose map it is made.

Let a Few Flowers Bloom, at Least

Think back to the statements about epistemology and ontology and you will recollect the phrase "procedures for the gathering of evidence". The ancient and honorable human habit of observing, guessing at what your observations might imply, trying get those implied outcomes to happen, and going back to do it all again, has lately been called "the scientific method". It is as old as humanity — though apparently we have gotten better and better at it — and it works with immaterial ideas just as well as it works with material objects. Let's use it on the question at hand: how might one apply the scientific method to get *understanding* (the hermeneutic goal) in place of *explanation* (the positivist goal)? Easy enough: one participates in a social situation, observes the apparent 'rules of the game' to the point of a tentative understanding, imagines a situation implied by those rules but not yet observed, and then tries to find or make occasions for that situation to happen so that its outcome may be observed. QED.

Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed this tour of my map of the discipline and its digressions, some of them off the map. You will get much the same story from Peter Gould's recent book, *The Geographer at Work*, and details on the power of recursion from Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*.

REFERENCES

Figures 1-3: Gould, 1985:34,301,344

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FIGURE 1.

Figure 3.5: The abduction of Geographia by Quantifactus, reprinted by permission of the anonymous artist who enjoys oxymorons.



FIGURE 2.



Figure 24.2:
Geographia abducted again, this time from an Establishment Quantifactus, across the Rio del Compromiso to the happy Marxian landscape. Compare to the original version, Figure 3.5. Will poor Geographia ever get her own back?

FIGURE 3.

Figure 28.1: Fed up with the bickering, Geographia takes command at last, carrying the Marxist revolutionary El Barbo, and the Capitalist consultant Quantifactus, back to the bank of geographical reality. The apples on the Tree of Knowledge are a bit more abstract today, but just as tempting as ever. Reprinted by permission of the anonymous artist who still enjoys oxymorons.



FIGURE 4.

