The Historical and Philosophical Emergence of Radical Geography

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THE 1960's

Throughout the modern history of geography Pattison's four traditions—area studies, land-man relations, spatial theory, and physical geography have basically encompassed the philosophical stances toward the discipline. Within the last decade, however, American geographers have seen the reemergence of a fundamentally different approach to the discipline—radical geography. Despite earlier European radical geographers such as Peter Kropotkin (1890's) and Karl Wittfogel (1920's), American radical geography's historical roots are found in the late 1960's for two primary reasons. First, the politically intense sixties bred a disenchanted society open to change. The two key political events of the decade, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, signified change and crystallized the onset of academic radicalism. A new climate of liberal reform spread across the nation reflected by antiwar demonstrations, peace marches, women's liberation, the environmental movement and eventually George McGovern's presidential candidacy. In many respects the winds of socio-political change swept the nation, particularly throughout universities.

Second, in the 1950's scientific geographers had rejuvenated the discipline with abstract spatial theory and powerful quantification. By 1965, however, many young geographers were "disillusioned with the 'scientific approach' to human geography espoused in the 1950's largely because of the perceived in-
ability of this approach to initiate major social changes." William Bunge, for example, described his own dramatic change in social awareness. He writes, "The Crime of Vietnam began in February of 1965. I was through the second draft of the logical extension of Theoretical Geography called, Geography, the Innocent Science . . . The political atmosphere was one of open-ended escalation to H-bomb war . . . I threw myself into the peace movement . . . ." He goes on at length to describe his personal absorption into activism and its ultimate merger with his academic life. Thus, young geographers like William Bunge riding the crest of social issues and awareness began to dismiss abstract, theoretical geography and begin in earnest a quest for social relevancy, political action, and eventually a new philosophical basis for their discipline.

The initial battle-cry was "Relevancy!" In 1967, sessions for relevancy began at the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers (AAG). In 1968 Bunge founded the Society for Human Exploration at Wayne State University. The next year he began the Detroit Expedition, an effort to thoroughly explore a blighted area in that city. In 1969, at Clark University, Ben Wisner edited the first publication of Antipode, whose purpose he declared in his introductory editor's note was "... to ask value questions within geography, question existing institutions concerning their rates and qualities of change, and question the individual." Finally, on the brink of the 1970's, the first session for "radical geographers" at the AAG meeting in Ann Arbor in 1969 symbolized the merging of people, purpose, and a publication into a concrete identity.

THE 1970's

Entering the 1970's most radical geographers were essentially political liberals looking for relevant social problems and unexposed inequalities. Articles on urban problems, for instance, published in Antipode could have been and were just as easily published by the National Academy of Sciences. In general radical geographers of the future still shared the same basic concerns with their professional peers. In 1972, however, as Richard Peet, editor of Antipode, writes "... the emphasis of radical geography changed from an attempt to engage the discipline in socially significant research to an attempt to construct a radical philosophical and theoretical base for a socially and politically engaged discipline." Rather than an assortment of liberal academic geographers and their work, now "radical geography" by definition truly became "radical."

The first driving force behind the quest for a truly different, radical approach to geography was a negative reaction to the established discipline. Radical geographers were discontent with what they saw to be abstract, indifferent scientific geography, but their disenchantment went farther and deeper. While radical geographers had once criticized conventional geographic research as simply irrelevant, now they took a step farther and began to question
conventional geography's philosophical basis and methodological ability to solve relevant social problems. As David Harvey wrote, "It is the emerging social conditions and our patent inability to cope with them which essentially explains the necessity for a revolution of geographical thought." Moreover, radical geographers not only suggested why conventional geography fell short, but why it served a negative function. In the words of Richard Peet, traditional geography gave "... ideological protection of a social and economic system owned and controlled by a ruling minority." Radical geographers assumed the function of conventional, established science, including geography, was to serve the established, conventional social system (capitalism), one by implication "unjust." Hence, radical geographers saw the absolute need for a completely new paradigm for geographical thought. In the succinct words of Richard Peet, "... a shift from one politico-scientific paradigm to another." Earlier "radical geography" basically was tied to a liberal, social science paradigm of modified capitalism. Now, however, after a profound critique of geography as a discipline, its philosophy, and its ultimate context in an inadequate system (capitalism), most radical geographers concluded that geography needed a new system and a new philosophical approach. Thus, after a protracted period of liberalism, this philosophical breakaway was the major stepping stone into a truly radical perspective.

Even as they rejected conventional geography, radical geographers chose new philosophical ground to build a new home. Marxism became the basis for a new social and economic system. Hence, the second driving force behind the shift to a wholly different, radical approach to geography was the thorough extraction of theory from Marxism. According to Richard Peet for example, "... the problem of ghetto formation in North American cities could be effectively attacked only at its source by the elimination of the market mechanism as the regulator of land use." To begin with, Marxist science rests on the foundation of its assessment about the importance and relationship of material production in social formation.

Second, Marxism also suggests the dialectical method as a different philosophical approach to science. Richard Peet again notes, "For Marxist geographers the combination of the materialist perspective and the dialectical method allows the development of non-ideological theory: that is, dialectical materialism is the philosophical basis of a truly scientific social science." The significance of a non-ideological theory to radical geography was amplified by J. Anderson in his Antipode article, "Ideology in Geography: An Introduction" (1973). He defined ideologies as "... systems of ideas which give distorted and partial accounts of reality, with the objective, and often unintended effect of serving the partial interests of a particular social group or class." Thus, for radical geographers the dialectical method repre-
sented a more objective, scientific approach than conventional scientific methodology.

Seen in the context of socialism and based on dialectical materialism, geography can be and was redefined in Marxist terms. According to Richard Peet, "Marxist geography is that part of the whole science dealing with the interrelation between social processes on one hand and the natural environment and spatial relations on the other hand."12 Different socio-political environments yield different landscape forms, albeit a capitalist or a socialist one. Marxist geographers might also for instance, study spatially the contradiction between the developed and the developing nations in capital holdings or economic class exploitation in the United States.

Marxist geography, however, cannot be simply defined and thereby understood, but intrinsic to radical geography as well is its relationship to other disciplines, and its fundamental, ultimate purpose. In his book, Radical Geography: Alternative Viewpoints on Contemporary Social Issues, Richard Peet states these two ideas as "Twin radical proposals: to make geography more obviously a part of a holistic science (and thus to bring the demise of this and all separate disciplines), and to make this whole science act on behalf of the construction of a social and economic system owned and controlled by all the people contained in it."13 Seen in a radical context as part of a holistic, all-embracing science, geography is distinguished from other social sciences only by its specialized focus on land-

man environment and spatial relations. Yet at the same time, Peet suggests that Marxist geography "... is so immersed in process (social) that it merges with the other social sciences ... "14 Hence, radical geography does not exist as it were, in and of itself, in essence, nor does radical geography exist for itself. Ultimately, radical geography aims to serve a functional role as an academic agent contributing to the eventual establishment of a Marxist society.

Throughout the 1970's, Marxist geography has been largely synonymous with radical geography. Two organizations, two particular university clusters of geographers, and a number of individual geographers sprinkled across Canada, England, and the United States have sought to crystallize radical geography in theory. The year 1974 marked the founding of the Union of Socialist Geographers. Soon after, another organization, SERGE (Socially and Ecologically Responsible Geographers) became another active forum for liberal geographers. In recent years Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, have been the most successful university locales for radical geographers.

Without question the three radical geographers mentioned already—William Burge, David Harvey, and Richard Peet—may well be the most prominent ones. William Burge, now in Toronto, Canada, is characterized as the vocal activist. His articles are adamant, vehement, and sometimes unequivocal. He writes, "I am short
tempered with academic geographers, even Marxist ones. The campus geographers tend to separate theory from practice. They read too much, and look, and, often struggle not at all. They cite, not sight.”

What Bunge fears most is ideological Marxist reductionism or the separation of practice and theory, even by fellow Marxist geographers. Hence, he stresses theory needs experiment, preaching needs practice. Some geographers have labeled him “the conscience of geography” or even “the Solzhenitsyn of geography.” However, Bunge’s very empirical research at Wayne State, Detroit, and Toronto, reflects his desire to actively practice radical geography as well as critique it.

On the other hand, David Harvey personifies academic-oriented geography. After he published *Explanations in Geography* in 1969, Harvey began his own rapid exodus from conventional geography to radical geography. In 1973 he published *Social Justice in the City* concerning spatial allocation and territorial social justice. Soon thereafter, he moved from a liberal position and relevancy research into questioning the focus of conventional geography, organizing models for promoting social change, and investigating Marxism as an alternative philosophical basis for geography. More recently he has written on topics such as capitalist development and accumulation of surplus value. Hence, he continues to be the leading Marxist theorist within the field.

Even as Bunge symbolizes the activist view within Marxist geography, so Richard Peet symbolizes another new trend in radical geography—anarchist geography. Rather than defining anarchy as social life without the authoritative presence of the state, Peet suggests, “...a more revealing definition is social life among a people who no longer need the coercive authority of the state.” Peet specifically hopes to extract anarchist theory from Kropotkin, “the great anarchist geographer.” In doing so Peet emphasizes the decentralization of people and production with a shift from competitive life structures to cooperative ones. Hence, not only does he envision anarchist geography as a logical extension of Marxist geography, but begins to depict a communist personality within society. At the same time Peet also represents somewhat of a one-man clearing house for Marxist material. Not only has he published a great deal in *The Professional Geographer* and edited the only book expressly devoted to the topic, *Radical Geography: Alternative Viewpoints on Contemporary Issues*, but he continues to edit *Antipode*, the key journal for Marxist geography.

THE 1980’s

Having traced the historical and philosophical development of radical geography, we need to understand at least synoptically what radical geographers perceive as their present relationship to other geographers. In the minds of radical geographers, Marxist geography has been either largely ignored by conventional geographers or fragmented by liberal geographers. Often conventional geographers like Gor-
Donald Clark and Michael Dear adopt the argument that "To be straightjacketed by Marxism is to fall into the same trap as orthodox paradigms—that is, the distortion of reality through ideological and methodological tools that may have little relationship to the problem being studied." Dialogue with mainline geographers has been extremely limited. Subscriptions to *Antipode* dropped off since the mid-1970's. Consequently, radical geographers have interpreted conventional geographers as either academically indifferent if not hostile. Radical geographers are also disenchanted with liberal geographers. In the minds of radical geographers, liberal geographers such as Buttimer, King, Phillips, Yuk Lee, and Yi Fu Taun have sought to synthesize certain parts of Marxist geography, but ignore others. In his article, *The Dialects of Radical Geography*, Richard Peet responds that "The problem of joining the mainstream of geography (even at its left current) is that Marxist analysis is deliberately fragmented." Wise or not, radical geographers do not tolerate philosophical fragmentation or synthesis. Consequently a serious cleavage has grown between liberal geographers and radical ones since the late sixties when they both carried banners for relevancy and social action.

In this paper I chose not to address the issue of whether radical geography is or should be recognized as a viable philosophical basis for geography. However, radical geographers have recognized the explicit need for greater maturity in three specific areas of radical geography that would, in fact, strengthen such a case. The first one involves the land-man tradition. Richard Peet states, "The materialist approach of Marxist geography can easily be applied to environment-man relations; yet this area of geography remains largely untouched." Second, James Blaut stresses that while Marxist theory was most easily extracted and applied to the advanced structures such as the United States, three areas of topical study were less directly addressed. He points out that "It proved more difficult, however, to apply Marxian theory directly to problems related to underdeveloped regions, to precapitalistic social forms, and to the geography of human thought—in a word, the tradition concerning cultural geographers." Third, radical geographers face the stiff challenge of stimulating an ongoing revolutionary consciousness in the academic world. While the political events of the sixties certainly engendered university students with a ready-made radical consciousness, past events cannot adequately motivate a new generation of students. Consequently, radical geography may need the impetus of new political activism on the societal scale in order to significantly strengthen its own academic position, especially in light of the fact that society moved markedly left in the 1970's, thereby co-opting a great deal of radicalism and absorbing its issues.

In conclusion, radical geography initially emerged in the 1960's in re-
sponse to a general malaise toward abstract, scientific geography and an aroused radical consciousness within society triggered by the political events of that decade. The original password was "relevancy." By 1970 "radical geographers" had begun meeting at the annual AAG meetings. Stimulated at least in part by a negative reaction to conventional geography, radical geography began the transition to a mature Marxist paradigm. After this philosophical breakaway, socialism formed the new socio-economic system and dialectical materialism formed the new philosophical method. Thereby Marxist geography became synonymous with radical geography. Throughout the 1970's, William Bunge, David Harvey, and Richard Peet spearheaded the development of radical geography primarily as practicer, preceptor, and publisher, respectively. In the minds of radical geographers today, radical geography has been largely ignored by mainstream geographers and often fragmented by synthesizing liberals. Nevertheless, man-land relations, certain topical areas, and academic radical consciousness must be strengthened for radical geography to fully mature in the future.

NOTES


6. David Harvey: "Revolutionary and counter revolutionary theory in geography and the problem of ghetto formation" Antipode, 8, pp. 13.


15. William Bunge, pp. 171.


