

Guest editorial

Venetian geographical praxis

To all appearances, the past fifteen or so years of the postmodern debate in geography have been an almost exclusively Anglo-American domain. Yet for many of those of us who navigate only on the edges of the Anglo-American academic empire—but are firmly emplaced within other geographical traditions—the theorisations of the postmodern coming down from the pages of the leading (and admittedly ‘international’) geographical journals have often appeared as a largely internal dialogue. Some years ago (and with the strong encouragement of several Anglo-American colleagues) I thus began to consider the possibility of creating some sort of meeting ground: a conference that would bring together some of the leading Anglo-American geographers of today with their Italian counterparts, offering an opportunity for dialogue between the two communities as well as a much needed recontextualisation of the postmodern debate.

The meeting finally took place in Venezia 10–11 June 1999, under the title of “Postmodern Geographical Praxis”. More than a conference proper, the encounter took the shape of a closed seminar, with the invited speakers delivering their presentations before what turned out to be an extremely heterogeneous and multinational audience; the three sessions around which the meeting was framed (“Rethinking postmodern geography”, “Postmodern cities?”, “Postmodern praxis and politics”) serving mostly as thematic provocations intended to structure the debate. On the Anglo-American side: Michael Dear (absent because of an unfortunate accident but present in virtual form with a written contribution), Steven Flusty, Cindy Katz, Don Mitchell, Neil Smith, and Edward Soja. Their Italian counterparts: Giuseppe Dematteis, Franco Farinelli, Vincenzo Guarrasi, Adalberto Vallega, and Gabriele Zanetto. Finally, acting as a sort of ‘bridge’ between the two disciplinary traditions: Denis Cosgrove and Gunnar Olsson, two scholars who have collaborated extensively with Italian geographers for quite some time and whose work has been translated into Italian.

What follows is certainly not intended as a critical assessment of the event, a task that would have proven not only difficult but also quite embarrassing, particularly considering my role as coordinator of the meeting. Rather, what I hope to raise within these few paragraphs are a series of questions and considerations stimulated by the conference; questions which not only speak to the coordinates of the postmodern debate but, perhaps even more importantly, interrogate the explicit and implicit relations with the Other within our discipline—and thus the need to understand geographical praxis also (if not principally) as a constellation of power/knowledge, binding adepts of the same disciplinary cult(ure)s.

The first point of reflection centres around the necessarily contextualised—and essentially open and unpredictable nature of all cultural projects. If anything, the Venice conference only confirmed, in fact, the by-now diffuse notion that the construction and elaboration of academic/scientific/cultural events is not only indelibly marked by their particular context but is also the result of a sort of spontaneous (screen)play that no organiser can fully control but can only, at best, steer in a particular direction; a play emanating from the dialectical relationship between the actors on the (conference) stage and the stage itself; this seems particularly true when the protagonists belong to diverse cultural traditions, but especially so when the stage itself is an entirely novel one.

The speakers’ presentations were, for the most part, free-standing lectures—lectures delivered in quite formal fashion, in clear contrast with the discursive humour and

requisite informality which characterises most such events internal to Anglo-American geography, as though there existed some sort of tacit agreement between the Anglo-American guests (almost entirely on stage) and the, if you will, 'continental' audience; an agreement in search of a new language and logic of communication necessitated both by the very particular layering of contexts and the resignification of the roles played by the respective actors.

Certainly, the setting provided by the Auditorium Santa Margherita (a stunning deconsecrated church in the heart of Venezia which, though in use as a conference venue for quite some time now is, essentially, a theatre, with a grandiose stage and balcony seating) where the conference was held contributed to the consciously theatrical tone of the relationship that seemed to have emerged between speakers and audience almost from the start, with the performances of the invited scholars playing to an unusually silent though extraordinarily engaged audience of spectators. Then there is Venezia itself—an urban theatre par excellence, and increasingly a sort of ideal, almost extra-territorial, space of/for global cultural experiments; an emergent 'European' place within which international institutions seem more at home than their local counterparts; more than any other Italian city, perhaps the ideal stage for ... a conference on the postmodern.

There was, however, also a third contextual layer which, to my mind, would profoundly mark the conference debate and which, in itself, is worthy of reflection: that is, the European one. The audience, in fact, was almost entirely made up of young geographers coming from all corners of Europe—or at least certain parts of it. Within the group of about 150 attendees, the most marked contingents (apart from the numerous Italian one) arrived from the Scandinavian (Norway and Denmark in particular) and German-speaking countries (Switzerland, Germany, and Austria); also a number of Spanish and Catalan geographers, as well as several from Estonia. What was most striking, perhaps, was the small attendance of British geographers; the complete absence of French participants, on the other hand, appears to confirm the persistence of a sort of 'parallel' geographical tradition that in France is still very much alive but which, for reasons I am certainly not fit to comment upon, does not nurture a broad dialogue with the Anglo-American ('international?') geographical universe, although it continues to exert significant influence on a number of European geographies, among them, the Italian. Equally surprising was the absence of American geographers—this despite the electronic diffusion of information about the conference across a spectrum of Anglo-American mailing lists; present, however, were geographers from Canada, South Africa, and Japan. Finally, a complete absence of geographers from the developing world, from the Southern Mediterranean and even from Central and Eastern Europe, should make us reflect on the highly selective nature of these kinds of events, both from the standpoint of information diffusion (which, overwhelmingly, travels along electronic circuits and thus automatically excludes those who are not plugged in), but also from an economic—as well as thematic—point of view. (Begging the questions: Is the post-modern considered a 'relevant' problem by other geographical traditions? Can we include other geographies within debates on the topic? Are we truly interested in the contributions they have to offer?) These are significant problems and ones that certainly do not offer facile solutions—but which every event proposing itself as 'international' cannot escape; problems which have, indeed, already been raised within the pages of this journal, most recently in the context of the organisation of the first International Critical Geography Conference in Vancouver in 1997 (Katz, 1998).

Let me return to this European contextual layer, however. I must admit (in entirely partisan vein, of course) that I was very pleased to discover the existence of a sort of virtual community of European geographers: for the most part, young researchers well versed in the main themes of Anglo-American geographical debates but also firmly

located within their own particular national and theoretical traditions. A community which appears, for the most part, a silent one: at least with respect to what are considered to be the traditional fora of international scholarly debate (that is, the 'leading' Anglo-American journals). An extremely heterogeneous community, to be sure, but whose members all share one common trait: all are forced continually and inescapably to dialogue/work on two parallel levels—within the context of their own national geographies, with their rules, logics, and languages, but also within the broader international (read Anglo-American) context, with its own logics and its own particular lingua franca. This constant mediation between two (if not more) academic universes, I believe, is the condition of many Finnish, German, Italian, Spanish, and Swiss geographers (among many others); a condition which places them in a rather different position compared with those who to enter into the academic debate at the international level can rely upon their mother tongue, upon their own disciplinary language (in all senses of the word); a condition of living in incessant and permanent translation between two or more cultural universes.

Above all, then, the Venetian meeting (to my mind, at least) raised a series of broader questions about the relationship between various geographies and the definition of the 'proper' site within which these may come together and give rise to a truly international dialogue.

First, I should stress that it is my firm belief that geographical praxis (and the power relations implicit within it) is also, inevitably, a dialectic between geographies informed by diverse traditions and which are the fruit of diverse social and political experiences/realities. I realise that this may seem to be quite a banal and obvious assertion, but it is one which often appears to be considered so banal as to be consigned to the forgetfulness of the taken-for-granted. Any geographer who has tried to navigate on the 'edge of empire' (to borrow Jane Jacobs's wonderful phrasing) knows what this signifies for the practice of her/his geographies. I thus hope that this conference on the postmodern has provided but one occasion among many to come to examine the ways and means of disciplinary communication and the logics of power which determine their coordinates within particular contexts.

On a second point, the meeting also provided further confirmation of the essentially undisputed dominion of Anglo-American geography. The numerous and attentive presence of scholars representing (allow me the deliberately provocative term) 'peripheral' European geographies only reinforces, in fact, the impression that today, the boundaries as well as the rules/coordinates of what passes for 'international' debate within our discipline are determined from within the Anglo-American universe. I believe that it is time to accept this fact in a serene and intellectually honest fashion.

Third, as I have already noted, the conference also highlighted the existence of a sort of virtual and only partially self-aware community of young European geographers: geographers who have adopted in part the languages and methodologies of Anglo-American geography, but whose intellectual bearings emerge from distinct national contexts and who labour to (col)locate themselves and their work at the confine between the two academic traditions that they must continually contend with.

Fourth (and following from the two previous points), although the English-language journals may certainly provide a formidable instrument of internal regulation and legitimation for the Anglo-American geographical community, they are not a propitious terrain for encounter and debate among diverse geographical traditions (though my editorial on the pages of this journal may provide proof to the contrary but, as we well know, there are always happy exceptions...). In fact, there exists a widespread conviction both among many Italian geographers as well as among many of my European colleagues that these journals' implicit claims of being 'international'—evidenced, for example, by numerous assessments of 'geography' (whether regional, feminist, postmodern, etc)

with no further qualifiers, when in fact referring exclusively to Anglo-American geography—are patently absurd if not downright pretentious; this is not to say that (in some cases, at least) these journals are not fora of cutting edge theoretical – scientific debate and discovery, or that they are not open to innovative ideas and approaches or even heated debates between diverse theoretical/methodological positions. The closure, rather, concerns the fact that all such debates are essentially internal to the Anglo-American geographical community, and that the discourse which allows access to their pages is one that is, to all extents and purposes, a national one. After they have experienced the repeated rejection of the use of any references and methodological frameworks which do not fit into the appointed disciplinary cosmologies, references, and frameworks somehow alien to the above-noted national discourse, many continental geographers (myself included) are left with the clear impression of having brushed up against a sort of barbed wire fence, of having attempted to breach a sort of magical confine of a universe which is hegemonic precisely because it thrives on a set of concrete principles commonly recognised by the dominant part of the geographical community and endowed with an extraordinary sanctioning power towards any external infiltrations [it would be interesting, in fact, to see how many foreigners without an Anglo-American doctoral degree have published a theoretical article (and not just local case studies) on the pages of a ‘leading’ journal in the last decade]. It is therefore deceiving, if not intellectually dishonest, to identify these leading journals as the locus of international debates—unless, of course, one retains the belief that the entirety of relevant contemporary theoretical contributions in geography can be limited to the Anglo-American world and to English-language publications.



Any incipient international debate must thus look to alternative fora. The extremely constructive and positive attitude of those present in Venezia towards this almost experimental recontextualisation of but one fraction of the disciplinary debate hints at the possibility of a dialogue and confrontation between diverse schools and traditions—and the great potential in such encounters (here evidenced in the presentations which clearly had to be rethought *vis-à-vis* a public whose expectations—and whose experiences—were quite different from those of a predominantly English-language audience). The result of this experiment was quite encouraging in this respect, yet international dialogue—to have disciplinary ramifications—certainly cannot be limited to such fragmented episodes which rely on individual initiative and are accessible only to the few.

As we all know, disciplines are, above all, the site of the production of a self-referential knowledge, an on-going elaboration of propositions, discussion, experimentation, and comparison which relies upon the existence of a community of scholars legitimated by reciprocal consideration, internal and external communication networks, these same scholars’ social visibility, the accessibility of their propositions and their capacity for self-reproduction. If we consider all knowledge as but a simplified representation of experience, a representation made explicit, communicated and contextualised, we can, accordingly, envision disciplines as a coherent accumulation of research experiences, a shared inheritance reproduced through the clear definition of its central foci more than the delimitation of boundaries with the activities of others. It is exactly the interplay between diverse languages which constitutes a discipline, though only as long as the plurality of interests does not result in such a differentiation as to prevent internal communication. Should such a differentiation occur, the tasks of the certification and the sedimentation of (in our case, geographical) knowledge could only become segmented in distinct sites (Zanetto,1991).

To prevent such segmentation of geographical knowledge within a series of distinct disciplinary ‘sites’ (which certainly appears a risk at present), we need a geographical

praxis capable of favouring dialogue and exchange between diverse traditions. Such a praxis, in my opinion, not only needs to elaborate a set of languages and discourses which facilitate internal communication and reciprocal recognition among geographers, but also needs to confront itself with the variety of ‘places’ which contextualise other geographies; with the variety of alterities making up the discipline.

Someone could object that a forum for international debate already exists in the shape of the International Geographical Union, but we all well know how little the outcomes of IGU meetings influence theoretical debates within the Anglo-American universe (with some noteworthy exceptions, of course). Such sites of exchange and contact could, rather, arise in the form of either ad hoc conferences—conferences thus conceived so as to constrain all participants to recontextualise their own presence and step out of the (internal) privileged position from which they are used to speak within their respective ‘national’ universes—but they could also be provided by authentically ‘open’ journals—journals bound by methodological rigour and governed by a set of shared rules, yet also able to provide a forum for truly diverse voices. Voices judged not merely on their ‘fit’ into the cosmology of Anglo-American thought (the apparent obsession of many referees) but, rather, on their potential contribution of knowledge to the discipline.

I certainly do not propose a full-scale reordering of the leading journals, but what we could perhaps imagine within their pages is a series of ‘windows’ upon the rest of the world (such as a regular column within which editors from different countries could be invited to conduct a discussion upon specific themes⁽¹⁾), or true fora which (really) bring together and confront the contributions of diverse national geographies on a specific topic. Certainly, the opening of such windows should not be confused with the construction of an entirely open, pluralistic, and polyphonic environment (which, in a sense, would be a rather problematic aim for a scholarly journal, necessarily bound by a certain set of codified and recognised rules), although it would seem to me already a significant improvement. A step, then, towards the construction of places within which the momentary (and possibly voluntary) suspension of national rules makes contact between diverse discourses, diverse histories and traditions, possible: a condition without which the creativity which comes of encounter and exchange cannot fully express itself. What we should try to construct, then, are ‘liminal spaces’—border spaces within which, to cite Lotman’s well-known metaphor, diverse *semiospheres* come into contact to create the opportunity for a true exchange of knowledge.

There is, of course, the not-negligible problem of language—even in the most literal interpretation of this term, for the bulk of Anglo-American geographers does not read other languages, while many non-Anglo geographers have difficulties expressing themselves in English. But I believe that an attempt—any attempt—at disciplinary pluralism is still well worth the effort: not only in the name of some idealised internationalism, but to render possible the contact and exchange that only such pluralism could bring about; if nothing else, extending past the Empire’s confines that attention to difference which critical Anglo-American geography has been so good at applying to itself.

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References

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⁽¹⁾ This journal’s most recent initiative (see volume 17, issue 6, 1999; and the next eleven pages) devoting a series of special book reviews issues to contemporary critical scholarship in languages other than English is certainly a step in this direction.