Human agency and human geography

DEREK GREGORY
Lecturer in Geography, University of Cambridge

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ABSTRACT. This commentary discusses the prospectus for a humanistic geography provided by the contributors to D. Ley, M. Samuels (eds) *Humanistic geography: prospects and problems.* The resurgence of a humanist tradition in geography has drawn its impetus in part from *la géographie humaine* of Vidal de la Blache, and an examination of the connections between the two conceptions shows a common concern with the efficacy of human agency within an essential 'boundedness' of practical life. A series of parallel developments within 'Marxian humanism' (and in particular the work of E.P. Thompson) is used to suggest that a scientific explication of the relations between agency and structure can be attained through the deployment of a concept of structuration. But this will also require a concept of determination capable of incorporating 'economy' and 'culture' within a single system of concepts, which presages a critical return to the traditional materialism of *la géographie humaine.*

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the volume of essays initiated and gathered together by David Ley and Marwyn Samuels under the title *Humanistic geography: prospects and problems*[1] provides a convenient vantage point from which to examine the resurgence of humanism in modern geography. I say 'resurgence' deliberately, because many humanist critiques have acknowledged, in one way or another, their continuing commitment to the tradition inaugurated by Vidal de la Blache and have celebrated at least the *esprit* if not the *loi* of his *géographie humaine.* Indeed, Emrys Bowen has even claimed that 'if there is a philosophy at all [behind modern geography] it is that of Paul Vidal de la Blache'.[2] Some of these connections are explored in the first section of this commentary, but for the moment I simply want to note that they have usually been phrased in resolutely retrospective terms: that is, they have been used to provide an historical warrant for the prosecution of a geography distinguished by what Ley calls 'a central and active role for man'.[3] Of course, none of these reconstructions have been entirely fideistic, and Buttimer is not alone in recognizing that the resonances of *la géographie humaine* need to be orchestrated afresh if they are to be 'understandable by succeeding generations',[4] but nevertheless the main thrust of all these various reformulations, it seems to me, has been to herald a recognizably romantic revival, a programmatic endorsement of Tuan's 'expansive view of what the human person is and can do'.[5] In one sense, perhaps, this is unexceptional. In effect, it is at once an enlargement of the creative dimension of human agency which all but collapsed during the excesses of the 'new' geography and a rejection of the mechanistic artifice of the first-generation models of the 1950s and 60s. As Ley and Samuels explained in their introduction,

> The convergence of science and technology, once the Promethean harbinger of utopian society, began to emerge more as a central villain in the exhaustion and despoliation of man's own environment. The linking of scientific rationality and politics, once the hallmark of enlightened democracy, morever, began to emerge as the chief mechanism for a stronger, if more subtle and therefore less penetrable, despotism.[6]

In their eyes, therefore, it was as much the *practical consequences* as the *intellectual deficiencies* of the then prevailing modes of enquiry which prompted the renewed concern for 'a more self-conscious, philosophically sound, and active understanding of a human existence beyond the self-limiting strictures of analytical methods and positive science'.[7] But while this echoes the emancipatory claims of modern critical theory there is a sense in which such a prescription *is* problematic, because when its protocols are translated into substantive work its neo-romantic vision of what critique entails often seems to invite a withdrawal *from* (or at least a contemplation, even a decoration, *of*) the world, rather than any sustained engagement *with* it. The signs are not difficult to see: the casual ransacking of fictional writing as a ready means of recovering the most obvious images of intentionality, prised away from the material structures which help give them their effectivity, and divorced from any serious recognition of what Steiner calls 'the sociology of the text, and of our relations to the text';[8] the exasperating interrogation of the mundane and the transparently trivial, devoid of any attempt to locate social actions in wider sequences of social reproduction and transformation, and blinded by a belief in the self-legitimating power of 'experience' to the need for any sort of theoretical effort or examination;[9] and the mannered preoccupation with stylistic form and literary experimentation, which annihilates communication by dressing up the utterly familiar shape of its arguments in the tattered and violently coloured weeds of a latterday Dada or the beautifully stitched and carefully draped silks of the Emperor's tailor.[10] Yet this is hugely ironic, because the critical intentions which surely lie behind the humanistic project have formed the starting-point for a series of parallel projects in sociology and social history which have (in the main) managed to move beyond its celebration of the existential freedom of the human being to admit what I shall call the 'boundedness' of human life. These attempts are therefore used in the second section of this commentary to suggest that the 'prospects and problems' of humanistic geography revolve around an understanding of the relations between *action* and *structure*. I hope to show that in so far as this couplet can be connected up to the original Vidalian prospectus, it is rather more than a wrinkled parchment from the past.

THE TRADITIONS: ECHO AND RESPONSE

The gradual emergence and progressive articulation of 'possibilism' in modern geography can be traced back to the encounter between Durkheim, Ratzel and Vidal de la Blache at the turn of the century. In effect, Vidal mediated between the two protagonists. He rejected Durkheim's proposed reduction of geography to social morphology by insisting that man 'joins in nature's game' and that the *milieu externe* was 'a partner not a slave of human activity'; yet while he shared Ratzel's belief that society ought not to be left 'suspended in the air', he was quick to qualify any lingering determinism by insisting that 'nature is never more than an adviser' and that the *milieu interne* revealed man as 'at once both active and passive'.[11] These mediations were doubly important because, as Berdoulay has shown elsewhere, Vidal's scheme led neither to a radical possibilism nor to environmental determinism; rather, his was essentially a neo-Kantian philosophy which embraced 'the organizing freedom of man, bounded by the realities of the mechanisms of the natural realm'.[12] As Vidal himself put it, we often think of man and nature as 'two adversaries in a duel. Man, however... is part of living creation, he is its most active collaborator. He acts upon nature only through her and by her'.[13] And it was this 'dialogue', as Buttimer calls it, which he intended to capture through the concept of the *genre de vie,* wherein the moments of what we might think of as a recursive creativity could be both powerful *facteurs géographiques* and yet also vital *agents de formation humaine:* in humanizing the environment for his own ends, so to speak, man humanized

himself.[14] Hence, in Berdoulay's phrase, the *genre de vie* became the locus of man's 'initiative and creative adaptation to his environment'.[15]

These usages were subsequently extended in geography by Jean Brunhes and others, and—more important for my present purpose—in history by Lucien Febvre. 'The choice must be made,' wrote Febvre. 'Either the living being is more or less passive under the action of the natural forces of its environment, and we can calculate its reaction with certainty and therefore foresee it by measuring its power of resistance to the measurable forces which opposed it. Or else the living being is endowed with an activity of its own and is capable of creating and producing new effects, in which case there is an end of determination, in the true sense of the word; and in its place we have only approximations and probabilities. We lose, on the one hand, much of the beautiful simplicity and certainty of the mechanical explanation. We gain, on the other hand... a richer and more complex view, better matched with the exact complexion of the phenomena of life'.[16] For the French school, therefore, the everyday movement of practical life displayed a bounded contingency, and such a philosophy clearly required a similarly fluid methodology which could retain and champion this sense of conditional agency against the competing claims of mere mechanism. Thus, as Lukermann recognized, *contingence* and the *calcul des probabilités* provided the scientific foundation and, indeed, 'the controlling precept of the French school'.[17]

There was, of course, much more to possibilism than I have been able to indicate in this brief sketch,[18] but its crude outlines can at least help to throw into relief the main contours of modern humanism in geography. In much the same way that possibilism can be opposed to environmental determinism, so I shall claim that humanism can be opposed to a newer, *geometric* determinism. This can be defined in terms of a problematic through which men and women are made to respond passively to the dictates of an underlying and universal spatial metric and an overarching and abstract spatial logic: an antinomy which is most easily caricatured by the evident contrast between the neo-positivist 'spatial organization of society' and the humanist 'social organization of space'. A humanist geography thus refuses to represent the landscape as what Tuan terms a 'determined, timeless and tidy world', and instead invites the parallel prospect of it as 'a repository of human striving', in which, in Olsson's view, there is an ever-present tension between certainty and ambiguity.[19] In much of humanist geography this tension is realized, both intellectually and practically, through the social construction, negotiation and contestation of particular concepts of space. According to Samuels, for example, the incorporation of spatial structure into any schema is a fundamentally human act, because it 'constitutes a minimum definition of man as the only historic form of life to emerge with a capacity for detachment.' The existential dilemma which results from this process of estrangement is constantly overcome, only to be resurrected time and time again, 'through human history', which is understood as a set of 'human efforts to overcome or eliminate detachment.' In this way, Samuels maintains, 'man continually endeavours to bridge or fill his distances with relationships, even as in the doing he necessarily engenders other distances'.[20]

This is more than a pre-reflective odyssey, however, and Tuan's attempts to elucidate the transitions between 'space' and 'place', for example, are predicated on an essential reciprocity between social cognition and spatial distance: 'it is possible to be aware of our attachment to place only when we have left it and can *see* it as a whole from a distance'.[21] Hence a geography of the life-world was supposed to emerge out of our various interactions as 'a kind of topological surface punctuated by specific anchoring points' each one 'stamped by human intention, value and memory', and the whole animated by recurrent rhythms and sudden dislocations which corresponded to the engagement and reaffirmation of existing

systems of typification or the emergence and reincorporation of new ones.[22] As a result, many of these early humanist projects were concerned with the existential and the affective, and their primary objective was 'a *nongeometric* space of human concern and involvement'.[23]

But as Entrikin has noted more recently, this is unduly restrictive, and a fully humanistic geography would have to include the geometric conception of space as but one social modality among many. In his view, Cassirer's neo-Kantian philosophy might provide a means of clarifying the ways in which the elaboration of conceptions of space is a feature of all human experience—but, again, one that is intrinsically *bounded,* so that conceptions of space are certainly not the free imaginings of a pure subjectivism.[24] Sack has made much the same point, and if his programmatic distinction between conceptions of space in 'sophisticated-fragmented' and 'unsophisticated-fused' modes of thought is accepted, then the humanist prospectus would be extended even further. The first of these sets 'recognize that they have to some degree conceptually separated subjective and objective, space and substance... [and have often] made efforts to attain their synthesis': but the recombinations remain partial and the conceptions of space which flow from them are characteristically specialized. Thus one can distinguish 'physical science conceiving of it in terms of a geometric space, social science in part sharing this conception but altering it through the introduction of feelings and perceptions in the form of specific places and cognitive and perceptual spaces; and art creating semblances of spaces and shapes in virtual space.' The second set, by contrast, make very few conceptual separations, and where these occur at all they do so at a low level of abstraction. Here one can distinguish the child's view of space, the 'practical' view of space, and the magical view of space.[25] These partitions are intended to be more than a classification—and this is vital—because they are taken to have definite material correlates. Thus Sack regards it as 'essential that we attempt to expand our analysis and define as clearly as possible the range of conceptions of space and their interconnections, which have directed man's behaviour towards the landscape'.[26] We know so little about these interconnections (in anything other than gestural terms) that the restricted domain of the early humanist projects can no longer be in question. To be sure, Tuan has made a series of careful collations of empirical examples which is broadly consistent with Sack's programme, but he has so far been unable to bring them together and expose their essential elements and relations.[27] Whereas what is particularly significant about Sack's project is that it represents these various conceptions of space as symbolic structures which can co-exist within *any* social formation: that is, they are intrinsic to *all* human thought and represent 'potentials of the human intellect.' Such a phrasing could invite a reduction to the assumptions and assertions of modern structuralism, but unlike Lévi-Strauss, Sack is exercised by the ways in which the combination of these conceptions of space is *historically bounded,* and he intends to examine 'how socio-economic structures affect the development, articulation and degrees of separation of the modes of thought'.[28] I cannot develop these propositions here, but they can, I think, be connected up to the Vidalian school's emphasis on the contingent ability of groups to escape 'from the tyranny of physical determinism by means of an idea: the idea they formed of their environment that impelled them to alter it'.[29]

To summarize (see Fig. 1): it should now be clear that the humanist tradition in geography need not be the simple, neo-romantic promotion of freedom over determination which it is sometimes assumed to be, tacitly or otherwise; instead, each of its variants recognizes (at least in part) the forcefulness of its rival's claims. *La géographie humaine* retained the centrality of 'nature' in human history just as humanistic geography retains the centrality of 'space'. But both of these retentions are effected by a translation into a language

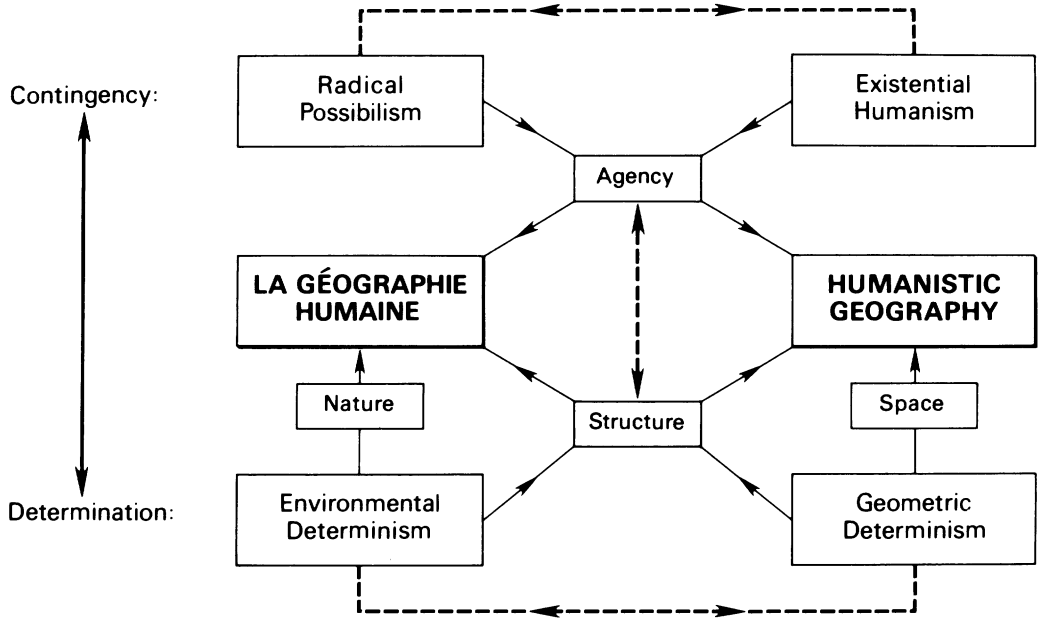


FIGURE 1. *La géographie humaine* and humanistic geography

of *agency* which is dictated by what the humanist tradition continues to regard as the essential and bounded contingency of practical life. And this 'boundedness' is admitted through a conception of *structure* which is, in principle, capable of defining (as it were) a 'matrix of contingency' in terms drawn from a recognizably scientific lexicon.

But we are still left with a number of problems unresolved, and in the next section I want to bring these into focus through an examination of their parallel (if partial) resolution in sociology and social history. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to a series of developments within what might broadly be called 'Marxian humanism', whose achievements and arguments are, with some notable exceptions, conspicuously absent from the contributions to *Humanistic geography.* I regard these omissions as strategic deficiencies because taken together they would, I think, have clarified the relationships between human agency and structural transformation which ought to lie at the very heart of any properly human geography. I say this because I still believe that any such geography must restore human beings to their worlds in such a way that they can take part in the collective transformation of their own human geographies; and without an adequate understanding of history, there can surely be no genuine embrace of creativity, contingency and change.[30]

THE PARALLELS: HARMONY AND DISCORD

E.P. Thompson once remarked that 'historical consciousness ought to assist one to understand the possibilities of transformation and the possibilities within people', and so it is encouraging to read Cole Harris's recognition of a 'remarkable convergence' between historical geography and humanistic geography.[31] In fact, his sensitive evocation of the 'historical mind' is so strikingly similar to Thompson's passionate celebration of 'historical logic' that a comparison between them can provide an excellent starting-point for an interrogation of these parallel traditions.[32]

Both men are immensely suspicious of the intrusion of the theoretical systems of 'science' into the domain of the historian. For Harris, the historical mind is 'contextual, not

lawfinding' or even 'law applying', and he remains unconvinced 'that there are overarching laws to explain the general patterns of human life', while Thompson angrily denounces those who try to bring historical materials 'within the same criteria as those of physics' and who wrench the patterns of the past to fit the templates of some '*a priori* mental schematism'. History is a complex *empirical* field, and Harris insists that if the 'initially meaningless' is to become the 'understandable' then the historian must remain 'open to life as it is' rather than closed off by an autistic theoreticism. So too, Thompson's historian has got to be 'listening' all the time, so that slowly he will be able to *hear* and eventually to *understand* the resonances of the past, to discern rhythms and cadences in its faint babble of fragmentary sounds.[33] But, even so, he will never be able to fix these through some written score which enables an endless performance of the past in the present, since he has to contend with a double hermeneutic which destroys any such stability or certainty. By this I mean, first, that what we call 'history' is a *re*construction, one which is irredeemably drenched in a subjectivity distilled from the reciprocal mediation of both past and present meanings.[34] As Harris puts it, the historian 'is not an empty vessel' but a human being who 'brings a particular vantage-point to the study of the past that, willy-nilly, affects the judgement of it.' And yet, he continues, 'there is no such thing as a marxist or a Catholic chemistry experiment. Common experimental procedures yield the same results in different laboratories; the same initial conditions applied to the same laws yield the same deductive inferences. The individual scientist fades into his laboratory as verified results come to the fore. Not so, despite all the determination of some nineteenth-century German historians, for the habit of mind we are discussing here'.[35] And in the same vein Thompson writes that ' "history" affords no laboratory for experimental verification', in part because it is the professional *duty* of the historian to make the constant and critical judgements to which Harris refers. 'Our vote will change nothing,' he says, 'and yet in another sense it may change everything. For we are saying that these values, and not those other values, are the ones which make this history meaningful *to us* and that these are the values which we intend to enlarge and sustain in our own present. If we succeed, then we reach back into history and endow it with our own meanings: we shake Swift by the hand'.[36] These couplings must always be provisional because their engagements and mediations mean that 'evidence does not stand compliantly like a table for interrogation; it stirs, in the medium of time, before our eyes': as Harris has it, 'data from the past are neither static nor separate from their interpretation'.[37] But, in the second place, we also have to recognize that this 'history' is *con*structed before it is *re*constructed, that historical eventuation is itself so labile that the historian requires 'a different kind of logic, appropriate to phenomena which are always in movement, which evince—even in a single moment—contradictory manifestations, whose particular evidences can only find definition within particular contexts, and yet whose general terms of analysis (that is, the questions appropriate to the interrogation of the evidence) are rarely constant and are, more often, in transition alongside the motions of the historical event.' And the reason for these perpetual re-directions and re-definitions, Thompson maintains, is that 'the "laws" (or as I prefer it, logic or pressures) of social and economic process are continually being broken into by contingencies in ways which would invalidate any rule in the experimental sciences'.[38] It is not simply that, unlike the physicist or the chemist, the historian has to deal with a pre-interpreted world, but rather that these interpretations had their own *effectivity*: in short, history is not pre-determined and human agency cannot be evicted from the historical process.

Many of these recurrent oppositions between the experimental sciences and history, or more generally between the sciences and the humanities, are as familiar as they are false. *Any* rigorous intellectual inquiry has to admit (and, moreover, does admit) its essential

subjectivity, and both the sciences and the humanities have to deal with the contingent and constant motion of the world. Further, if we cannot accord any sort of privilege to a theoretical language, if as Thompson says 'all that is necessary to know about history [cannot] be constructed from a conceptual meccano set' and the humanistic project is not to become the abstract exercise in 'social engineering' which Harris fears,[39] then it is surely also true that we cannot accord any sort of privilege to the observation language either. A properly hermeneutic conception of inquiry would necessarily involve the recognition of a fully *reflexive* relation between the two: and in their substantive work both Thompson and Harris provide clear and often exhilarating demonstrations of the creative effort which this entails. *Of course* this must make our findings provisional, but there is nothing exceptional in this; it is a commonplace of modern science.[40] The real problem, and the opposition of most substance, is—as Thompson freely acknowledges—'to find a model for the social process which allows an autonomy to social consciousness within a context which, in the final analysis, has always been determined by social being.' So, he asks, 'can any model encompass the distinctively human dialectic by which history appears as neither willed nor as fortuitous, as neither *lawed* (in the sense of being determined by involuntary laws of motion) nor illogical (in the sense that one can observe a *logic* in the social process?'[41] And it is precisely this question, I suggest, which a humanistic geography will need to answer.

In part, perhaps, the solution is a matter of style, and one which might even demand the literary experimentations I criticized earlier: hence Olsson urges us to learn to weave 'a net of words' somehow 'sensitive to the rhythm of that sound-dance that bends and moves without ever destroying the penumbrae between external and internal, subject and object, body and soul'.[42] And, certainly, I can recognize—and for that matter frequently share—the frustrating feeling of trying to write 'four sentences in one' which Tuan recalls from Sartre, since, as he himself writes, 'the depiction of complex and tenuous relationships as they exist simultaneously calls for a language that is subtle and richly suggestive'.[43] But while I have no difficulty in accepting that the creative dimension of language cries out for exploration within the humanistic tradition—without it, as Steiner once said, we turn forever 'on the treadmill of the present'[44]—most of these experiments seem to me to have been far from successful. This is not to say that they have been unimportant, of course, but I think that their real value will lie more in an admission of their failure than in the agonized pursuit of still more contortions of sound and collisions of sense. Indeed, one can (I hope) be forgiven for thinking sometimes that the two most neglected skills in modern geography are reading and writing. How far this has been due to the eclipse of the Vidalian tradition I cannot say, although some could no doubt press the case, but I do know that one only has to turn to a book like *The making of the English working class*—for example—to realize just how impoverished and contrived most of our own efforts are. There, Thompson majestically mirrors the elusive and allusive cascade of human history, and writes with a rare sensitivity and a grand passion. He refuses to confer upon his reconstructions the spurious objectivity of historians whose pallid sentences, bare of adjectives and adverbs, display a past drained of the sensuous swirl of contingency and determination.[45]

Yet Thompson is no calligrapher illuminating the archives for the sake of some higher aesthetic; his whole project arises from definite political commitments and in turn entails definite political consequences, *which are informed by and sustained through a developing system of concepts.* This is clearly not the place to trace its complex history: it evidently shares many of the features of Gramsci's humanism—particularly in its assimilation of concepts of praxis and hegemony—and it also owes much to a lifelong association with Raymond Williams.[46] At the same time, however, (and Thompson is right to insist on the importance of this), it arises

from his experience as a working historian. This needs to be remembered throughout the discussion which follows, because the easiest way to reduce Thompson's narrative flow to a succession of still-born images is to prise it away from its empirical course. In any event, whether he is writing about history or writing history, his system of concepts always has two central, connected concerns: the relation between human agency and social structure and the relation between economy and culture.

If these two couplets form the co-equal axes of Thompson's problematic, the first is perhaps *primus inter pares:* what he himself identifies as his fundamental concern 'with the radiating problems of historical determinism on the one hand, and of agency, moral choice and individual responsibility on the other'.[47] These have a common origin (and destination) in the 'rule-governed structuration of historical eventuation':

> Societies (and a 'society' itself is a concept describing people within an imaginary boundary and actuated by common rules) may be seen as very complex 'games', which sometimes afford very material evidences as to their character (the pitch, the goals, the teams), sometimes are governed by visible rules (rule-books of law and constitution), and are sometimes governed by invisible rules, which the players know so deeply that they are never spoken, and which must be inferred by the observer. . .
>
> The whole of life goes forward within 'structures' of such visible and invisible rules, which prohibit this action and assign a special symbolic significance to that. . .
>
> When the rules of a game have been read or inferred, we can then assign each player his role or function in the game. He is (in terms of those rules) the game's carrier, an element within its structure—a half-back or a goalkeeper. In exactly this sense we can say that a 'worker' is the bearer of productive relations; indeed, we have already defined her in this way when we call her a 'worker' rather than a 'second violin'. But we must take the analogy further. For we do not go on to say that the goalkeeper is *being gamed*. . .[48]

The analogy is a familiar one, of course, and many human geographers will recognize it.[49] Like all analogies, it has its deficiencies and must not be pressed too far. Anderson argues, for example, that 'it is inoperable as a general analogy for large-scale or long-term processes, which are not consciously learnt systems—or where they exceptionally become so, are fought not *within* but *over* rules'; but Thompson is well aware of this, and his remarkable coda to *Whigs and hunters* (for example) is a full acknowledgement of the importance of negotiation and contestation. It is surely not the case that the analogy breaks down 'at every point', because if, as Anderson says, Thompson's intention is that 'within these rules, the players confront each other as creative agents' then presumably their engagements can, consciously or otherwise, reaffirm *or* refashion the domain within which they take place.[50] But nevertheless, if a more coherent theoretical explication can be provided then the risks of misunderstanding and misinterpretation might be reduced (although this is not the only reason for such a translation), and I now want to show that there is a theory of structuration which is capable, in principle, of accommodating Anderson's insistence on the 'basic duality of the forms of historical determination'[51] in terms which are congruent with Thompson's project.

The theory of structuration owes something to French social theory, and particularly to Bourdieu and Touraine, and also to Habermas's revived critical theory, but I prefer to draw largely on Giddens's version because, while it is undoubtedly programmatic, it is still the most fully developed. The central theorem of Giddens's scheme is the 'duality of structure', the claim that social life displays an essential 'recursiveness'. By this he means that in the reproduction of social *life* (through systems of interaction) actors routinely draw upon interpretative schemes, resources and norms which are made available by existing structures

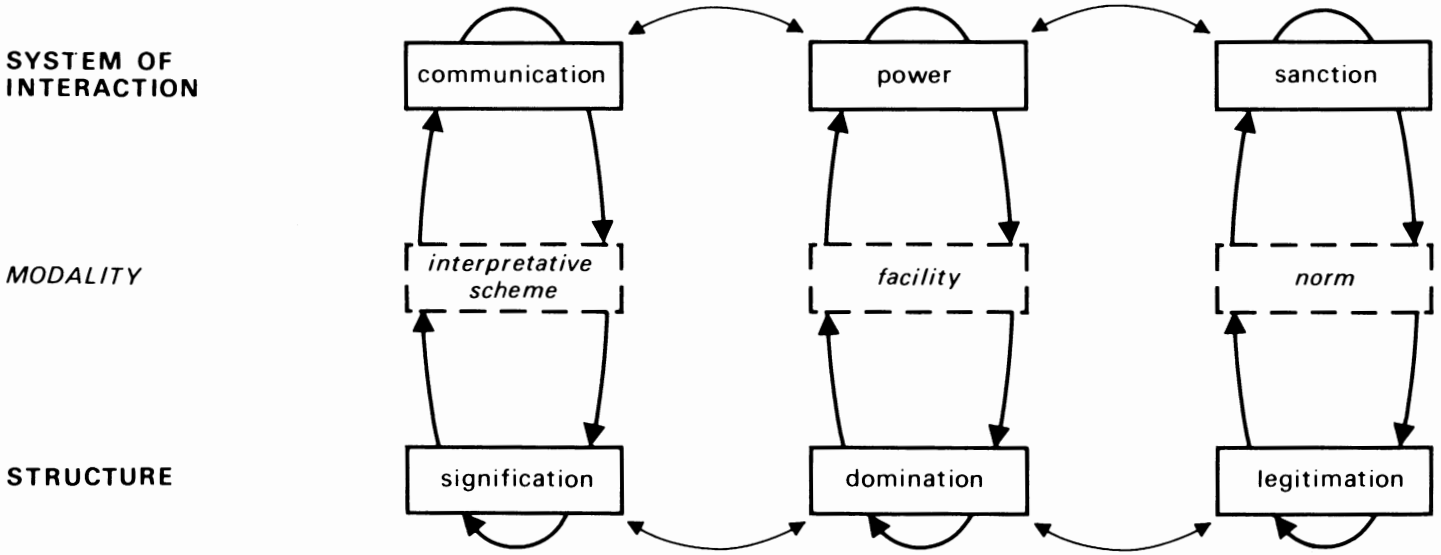


FIGURE 2. The theory of structuration (after Giddens)

of signification, domination and legitimation, and that in doing so they thus immediately and necessarily reconstitute those *structures:* in short, 'the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems' (Fig. 2).[52] Bourdieu makes much the same point when he says that 'objective structures are themselves products of historical practices and are constantly reproduced and transformed by historical practices whose productive principle is itself the product of the structures which it consequently tends to reproduce'.[53] What is important about characterizations of this sort is not so much the systems and structures which they distinguish—where there is no doubt a lot of room for argument—but rather their recognition that in drawing upon these various modalities the actors involved are displaying some degree of 'penetration' of practical life, whether they are able to verbalize their knowledge or not, and that consequently *structure is not a constraint on or a barrier to action but is instead essentially involved in its reproduction.*[54]

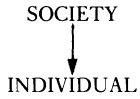
I take this to be a major advance. In their editorial introduction to *Humanistic geography,* Ley and Samuels note that Durkheim rather than Weber has for long been the (implicit) model for much human geography, but in recent years, as they also recognize, there has been a break from this reified vision of the relation between action and structure in part as a direct response to the voluntarist critique, which has reinstated (and, I shall say, *over*stated) the efficacy of intentional action. The end-result has been the gradual emergence and incorporation of what I propose to call a form of dialectical reproduction, in which 'reality is a social construction. . . that acts back upon its subjects, sometimes in ways that may remain unseen and taken for granted' so that they 'may be unaware of the full extent of [their] bondage'.[55] Hence, to particularize, Ley envisions a synthesis which can account for 'the dialectical relation between the structural realities and the human enterprise of constructing reality' and Duncan gives this a substantive edge through his incisive disclosure of the ways in which 'man produces a world both of abstractions—that is, ideas, values, norms of conduct—and of real concrete objects, which, although they are his own product, he nevertheless permits to dominate him as objective, unchanging facticities'.[56] This newest scheme, in all its versions, generally makes frequent borrowings from Berger and Luckmann's interactionism (some of the phrasing above is in fact theirs) and from Schutz's constitutive phenomenology, but while it might appear to offer a highly suggestive integration of the earlier oppositions of traditional social theory, in fact it remains incapable of overcoming the limitations of their mechanistic determinism and voluntaristic idealism; instead, as Bhaskar contends, it conjoins and compounds them and cannot sustain a genuine conception of change and hence of history, which, as I have argued already, is so vital to the humanist project (see Table I).[57]

Thompson's second couplet (economy and culture) similarly separates and recombines elements which are usually either opposed or reduced one to the other. We can take Sahlins's critique of anthropology as representative of the usual oppositions. He distinguishes two basic 'paradigms' according to

> whether the cultural order is to be conceived as the codification of man's actual purposeful and pragmatic action; or whether, conversely, human action in the world is to be understood as mediated by cultural design, which gives order at once to practical experience, customary practice and the relationship between the two. The difference is not trivial, nor will it be resolved by the happy academic conclusion that the answer lies somewhere in between, or even on both sides (i.e. dialectically). For there is never a true dialogue between silence and discourse: on one side the natural laws and forces 'independent of man's will' and on the other the sense that groups of men variously give to themselves and their world. The opposition therefore cannot be compromised.

TABLE I
Action and structure: four models of historical change

I : REIFICATION: typified in social theory by Emile Durkheim and by some neo-Marxist formulations

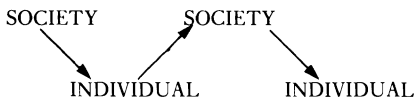


society is a reality *sui generis* which is external to and constraining upon human agency

II : VOLUNTARISM: typified in social theory by Max Weber

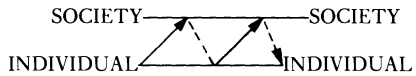
society is constituted by intentional action

III : DIALECTICAL REPRODUCTION: typified in social theory by Peter Berger



society forms the individuals who create society in a continuous dialectic: society is an externalization of man, and man a conscious appropriation of society

IV : STRUCTURATION: typified in social theory by Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens



social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute them: the two are recursively separated and recombined

And, as one ought to expect, Sahlins is unequivocal in his recognition, 'as the decisive quality of culture—as giving each mode of life the properties that characterize it—not that this culture must conform to material constraints but that it does so according to a definite symbolic scheme which is never the only one possible. Hence it is culture which constitutes utility'.[58] In a way, perhaps, Thompson would share this endorsement of the creative and the affective: indeed, to some critics his project is a 'culturalism' in which the economy is only ever present through the categories of a subjective experience, and in a stubborn reversal of classical Marxism Thompson is supposed to effect, as it were, a reduction 'upwards'.[59]

Certainly Thompson is prepared to argue that the classical model is 'actively unhelpful' to a working historian. Its formulation of an economic base counterposed to a political and ideological superstructure is, he says, a 'lamentable image', partly because (as I have already shown) 'any human existential process *must* be constricted and deformed [when it] is contained within a metaphor out of the text-book of a constructional engineer', but partly too because 'there is an economic logic *and* a moral logic, and it is futile to argue as to which we give priority since they are different expressions of the same "kernel of human relationship" '.[60] In fact, Thompson will have nothing to do with concepts of determination, at least in the usages of classical Marxism or even (and particularly) in the formulations of newer, structural Marxisms which invite an ulterior reductionism. He spells out his reasons by returning to his commentary on the analogical 'game':

> Marx's most extraordinary accomplishment was to infer—'read'—'de-code'—the only partly visible structure of rules by which human relations were mediated by money: capital. He often glimpsed, sometimes grasped, other invisible rules which we, after one hundred years, are—or ought to be—able to read more plainly. There were other, and significant, symbolic and normative rules which (in my view) he overlooked. Some of these were not within the view of his contemporary knowledge, and for such rules Political Economy had no terms.[61]

If, then, we must always remember that 'social and cultural phenomena do not trail after the economic at some remove' and that 'they are, at their source, immersed in the same nexus of relationship', we must also effect an *analytical separation* and examine them 'as forms in their own right'. Thompson believes that this requires 'a new set of terms, not entailed within the premises of Political Economy'. Political Economy

> had no terms—had deliberately, and for the purposes of its analytical science, *excluded* those terms—which become immediately essential if we are to comprehend societies and histories. Political Economy has terms for use-value, for exchange-value, for monetary-value, and for surplus value, but not for normative value. It has no terms for other areas of consciousness. . . We may hypothesize that one 'vocabulary' will 'reappear' within the other, but we still do not know how, by what means or mediations.[62]

An example which goes right to the heart of the matter ought to clarify what is at stake, although I can do little more than sketch out an argument which is inevitably much more complicated and contentious than my discussion can suggest. In a challenging essay directed towards a 'humanised conception of economic geography' Wallace shows, *inter alia,* that the spectre of 'rational economic man' which haunted classical Political Economy was *not* the a-historical, a-cultural abstraction conjured up by our contemporary critique. Wallace claims that the concept was much more than 'a methodological device to insure the maximization of utility at the margin'; it was also a very definite secularization of a Calvinist theology which still had considerable force in a pre-industrial capitalist society. 'Rational economic man' was thus at once a theoretical and an empirical notation, and as such was tied to a deep-seated and historically-specific structural system which, Giddens would say, constituted it as meaningful, as legitimate and as powerful. In effect, it was an incorporation of the cultural lexicon of Puritanism into the language of Political Economy.[63]

What is especially important about this example is that it gestures towards the complex web of connections radiating out in all directions from what is ostensibly a purely economic concept, and one which we can now identify as one of Thompson's 'junction-terms'. Thompson makes much the same movement himself when he recalls that in *Whigs and hunters* he

> found that law did not keep politely to a 'level' but was at *every* bloody level; it was imbricated within the mode of production and productive relations themselves (as property-rights, definitions of agrarian practice) and it was simultaneously present in the philosophy of Locke; it intruded brusquely within alien categories, reappearing bewigged and gowned in the guise of ideology; it danced a cotillion with religion, moralising over the theatre of Tyburn; it was an arm of politics and politics was one of its arms; it was an academic discipline, subjected to the rigour of its own autonomous logic; it contributed to the definition of the self-identity both of rulers and of ruled; above all, it afforded an arena for class struggle, within which alternative notions of law were fought out.[64]

In one sense, of course, none of this need be entirely incompatible with Althusser's reading of Marx, as Thompson seems to suppose: Anderson reminds us that the formal protocols of *Reading Capital* 'spell out just such a complexity of terrain'.[65] And in another sense it recalls the relational view of Marx which Ollman (and Harvey) have commended to us; but Thompson's admission of 'the inextricable interlacing of economic and non-economic relations' is not intended to allow relativism to make a forced entry.[66] If we must go further and eventually effect a reintegration of what Thompson was once disposed to call culture and 'not-culture', then he evidently accepts that this has to be a *structured recombination* (and here

too he is plainly not so very far from Althusser). So a concept of determination has to be allowed back in; but in terms which return us once again to the capacities and capabilities of a bounded human agency, one which 'will not be set free from ulterior determinate pressures nor escape determinate limits'.[67]

Yet although Thompson clearly wants to define determination 'in its senses of "setting limits" and "exerting pressures" '[68] he rarely develops this in any general fashion. Instead, he repeatedly acknowledges the very full discussion provided by Raymond Williams, in which the co-equal valency of the two definitions is underlined:

> 'Society' is then never only the 'dead husk' which limits social and individual fulfillment. It is always also a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations and, to take the full weight of 'constitutive' are internalized and become 'individual wills'. Determination of this whole kind—a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures—is in the whole social process itself and nowhere else: not in an abstracted 'mode of production' nor in an abstracted 'psychology'. Any abstraction of determinism, based on the isolation of autonomous categories, which are seen as controlling or which can always be used for prediction is then a mystification of the specific and always related determinants which are the real social process—an active and conscious as well as, by default, a passive and objectified historical experience.[69]

It is not difficult to see how closely this accords with Thompson's own intentions, and the humanist phrasing together with the stress on empirical specificity indicate a genuine distancing from Althusser. But Williams takes Althusser much more seriously than Thompson does, and continues with a sustained examination of one of the central ('decisive') concepts of the Althusserian—indeed, any Marxian—problematic : the forces of production, which he defines as all those activities which 'are the necessary material production within which an apparently self-subsistent mode of production can be carried on.' The thrust of Williams's argument is that these are not confined to the economic order alone: 'the social and political order which maintains a capitalist market, like the social and political struggles which created it, is necessarily a material production'; so too is the cultural order[70]. If we accept Williams's formulation, then a major deficiency of Thompson's work would be not so much his relegation of the economy (although this is extremely important) but rather his failure to explore the *determinate effects* of all of these material instances. Anderson is surely—and sadly—right when he says of *The making of the English working class* that

> the parity between agency and conditioning asserted at the outset [the famous claim that the working class 'made itself as much as it was made'] remains a postulate that is never really tested through the relevant range of evidence for both sides of the process. For all their power, the descriptions of mass immiseration and alienation etched in the second part of the book are in no sense equivalent to a survey of the objective determinants of the formation of the English working class. It is not the structural transformations... which Thompson invokes at the head of this part of the book which are the objects of his enquiry, but rather their precipitates in the subjective experience of those who lived through these 'terrible years'. The result is to resolve the complex manifold of objective-subjective determinations whose totalization actually generated the English working-class into a simple dialectic between suffering and resistance whose whole movement is internal to the subjectivity of the class.[71]

These precipitates and subjectivities are not confined to the cultural, of course, and as I have already shown they can be registered in economic and political notations too. But what

has to be recognized, crucially, is that *all* of these notations are tied to what, following Giddens, we can think of as *structural domains,* and that some means of establishing their *hierarchy of effects and determinations* is still required.[72]

Thompson's failure to provide this, except in largely gestural terms, is strategic, and its tacit denial of the co-equal status of agency and structure that he insists on elsewhere arises at the intersection of the two central axes of his problematic. In classical Marxism a concept of determination was secured through the economy, and while subsequent reconstructions have tried to distance themselves from a brute economic determinism, most of them[73] have nevertheless retained a space for the effectivity of the economy: in the case of Althusser via a concept of structural causality, in which the 'dominance' of economic, political or ideological levels is determined by the economy.[74] But Thompson conflates economism with structuralism, so that when he argues that materialism is not closed around the economy (which Althusser would surely accept) he immediately moves towards an opposing construction which *also* 'takes the form of de-gutting Marx of any structuralist moment whatever'; in effect, a culturalist voluntarism.[75] This is something of a simplification, certainly, because there are elements (but only elements) of economic and even cultural determination in *The making of the English working class* and *Whigs and hunters,* but these remain surreptitious, submerged and scarcely recognized, so that in the main these twin identifications can, I think, be substantiated.[76] Now Thompson quite rightly has no time for intellectual fideism, so that in so far as this manoeuvre signals a departure from orthodox Marxism it would not matter very much: *except* that his restoration of 'culture' over the classical columns of the economy then becomes inherently unstable because it is simultaneously a promotion of human agency *against* social structure, whereas the practical power of Marxism arises precisely from 'its contradictory *combination* of determinism *and* voluntarism, its emphasis on the laws of capitalism and the struggle to release men from subjugation to them through their own free practice'.[77] To say this is emphatically not to imply that the status of the economy is unproblematic and that questions of determination are easily answered in either theoretical or empirical terms; but it *is* to argue that the identifications which Thompson makes need to be prised apart.

And in fact these fusions provide the architecture within which virtually all of *Humanistic geography* is constructed. I can only give one example here, but it is enough to suggest the overall design. In his own chapter Ley suggests that the transition from 'liberal' to 'socialist' formulations which Harvey advertises in *Social justice and the city* is, in effect, 'from Park to Engels, from cultural to economic perspectives', and that in consequence it invokes a 'world of reductionism' and 'determinism'. The symbolism of the Escher sketch on the dust-jacket is supposed to be symptomatic of the transition: the perspective 'of an outside engineer rearranging his position, altering his angle, but forever remaining separate from his subject, viewing it, objectifying it, modelling it, but never participating in its existence, never allowing *its* perspective to dominate'. The imagery is strikingly similar to Thompson's, and its negative much the same: a counter-movement towards the cultural, at once transcending 'a well-established orthodoxy in the discipline' and establishing a space for the creative dimensions of human agency.[78] If it were not for Wallace's spirited—and, let it be said, single-handed—attempt to reconstruct economic geography in humanist terms[79] it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that the humanist project is circumscribed by an unyielding culturalism.

But this is more than a welcome reinstatement of cultural geography and much more than the profound correction against economism which Hall applauds in Thompson's work,[80] because its recognition of the boundedness of practical life is itself bounded by starkly

culturalist enclosures: its preoccupation with Jameson's 'prison-house of language' and its excavation of the affective passages between constructions of 'space' and 'place' display, if not an idealism, then at least a *mentalism.* And yet if a properly human geography is to emerge out of the present humanist critique, it will clearly have to recognize the effectivity of structures other than the cognitive and the cultural. Others forms (or levels) of determination must be addressed, otherwise humanism will indeed be condemned, inescapably, to the contemplation and decoration I spoke of at the beginning. Both 'nature' and 'space', to recall the two concepts of central importance to our own humanist tradition, clearly and co-equally reach into and out of structures of economy and politics as well as of culture, and without an adequate account of their *articulation*—without some means of incorporating them within a single, non-reductive system of concepts—the domain for a truly effective human agency will be severely restricted, and the practical intentions of the humanist project irredeemably compromised.

CONCLUSION

To some commentators, of course, they are tarnished already. Humanism 'must either compete with science—a battle lost before begun—or accept a diminishing jurisdiction' because it is incapable of recognizing and hence of resisting 'objective societal forces'; more dangerously, it is incorrigibly infiltrated by 'an idealism enshrined in such concepts as "intention" or "spirit" ' which abstracts not only the individual from society but also social consciousness from 'the production and reproduction of the means of existence'.[81] The violence of the rhetoric barely conceals the cardboard caricature at which it is hurled. As I have tried to show in this commentary, there is nothing in the humanist project that is necessarily incompatible with a scientific method; although we might want to contest the ways in which a scientific status is ascribed to a particular method, as long as these ascriptions are recognized as moments of social negotiation—that is, provided their essential *subjectivity* is admitted—then the protocols of a rigorous and honest intellectual inquiry can, in principle, be sustained. And in its emphasis on the *intersubjective* constitution of social life humanism demonstrates that it is capable, in principle, of an acknowledgement of the recurrent and recursive relations between the individual and society as being fundamentally implicated in the production and reproduction of both social life and social structure.

Neither of these responses, however, can completely meet the force of the critics' objections. Both of them reach awkwardly beyond the compass of the present essay to indicate the direction of another, equally essential debate. Its locus is the concept of *determination.*

I cannot even sketch the outlines of that debate here, but some summary comments are necessary. Its resolution will depend, I suggest, on a considered recognition of the ways in which both the social construction of a 'science' and the structuration of society can be shown to depend on a prior *materialism.* The location of science, and in particular of theoretical activity, in relation to the social formation and its 'matrix' mode of production is an issue of major importance in modern Marxism; and while I have argued that humanism is not indifferent to the procedures of a recognizably scientific method, its recognition of their essential subjectivity cannot of itself provide protocols which allow for the social adjudication of competing methods. I have discussed elsewhere Habermas's rejection of any claims for science as a privileged, autonomous activity and his synoptic programme for a theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, and there is no need to repeat that discussion now. But what is important in the present context is that these counter-claims, although clearly contentious, indicate how—as both Marxism and humanism suppose—different forms of knowledge (including different conceptions of science) are constituted *by determinate social practices.*[82] In

doing so, they clearly direct attention towards what Cox calls the 'practical problems in answer to which social life must be reproduced':[83] and I shall want to claim that in the most general terms these flow from the dialectical relation between man and nature which pulses at the very heart of human historicity. More important still, it is this relation which provides the fundamental theorem of structuration, for according to Marx:

> Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body. . . in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. . .[84]

This double movement or 'contradictory unity', with all its precursive evocations of the Vidalian school, is seized on by Giddens to draw out the mediations which it necessarily entails (and which received such short shrift in Vidalian geography): the relation between man and nature is 'always mediated: by society, or the institutions in terms of which, in the duality of structure, social reproduction is carried on. The existential contradiction of human existence thus becomes translated into structural contradiction, which is really its only medium'.[85] With this manoeuvre the relations between human agency and social structure *and* between man and nature are at once brought within a coherent problematic: they are, as it were, simultaneous equations which cannot be solved separately.[86]

Remarks of this sort can obviously provide only a fragile bridge between humanism and Marxism; but it must be strengthened. The materiality of social life *is* weakly developed in modern humanism, and as a result it inevitably encounters severe difficulties in comprehending 'objective societal forces', a lacuna which must in turn affect its attempts to elucidate social meanings and explicate social actions. And while Marx himself never lost sight of the power and the promise of human agency, the more structuralist versions of Marxism have such an attenuated conception of it that they face equally formidable difficulties in comprehending intentionality and consciousness, which in turn compromises their accounts of the reproduction and transformation of social structure. At the very least, therefore, it can be seen that a return to the original Vidalian prospectus might be extraordinarily fruitful: not, as some commentators fear,[87] to *resurrect* the determinist-possibilist debate, but rather to *reconstruct* it in order to explicate the material grounding of practical life which is at the root of both the *genre de vie* and the mode of production.

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