The Political Economy of Society and Space

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The theoretical debate

Even though Benno Werlen, in this contribution presents his approach as a ‘praxis centred approach’ it remains pretty clear that it is still strongly focussed on spatial action which he dubs as ‘everyday regionalisation’ and less so on spatial practices in a more comprehensive sense. If one would perform a simple content analysis of his main contribution to this issue one would find 111 times the word ‘Handlung’ or ‘Handeln’ and only 21 times ‘Praxis’ or ‘praktisch’. Of course strictly speaking this does not prove anything, but makes it, nevertheless, pretty evident, that spatial action is the core issue in his paper. Throughout his whole work Werlen has been developing the social theoretical concept of spatial action, and forcefully argued for a shift in the focus of human geography from space and spatial differences to (spatial) action and the social construction of space and place. Also in his main contribution to this issue, this can be seen as his main achievement. He puts the human being and human actions at the heart of this social constructivist approach to space. As such his work is strongly rooted in humanistic geography (Cloke, Philo & Sadler, 1991) and phenomenological philosophy (Pickles, 1985; Jackson, 1981) as the starting point for this endeavour. In contrast to the hitherto human geography he thus also developed a strong socio-theoretical basis for human geographic theorising about the relationship between Society and Space. Although, many of the social scientific sources he uses in developing his thoughts stem from the very strong German tradition in the social sciences, the socio-theoretical foundation of human geography as envisioned by Werlen, was initially received rather sceptically in the field. One can understand this if one takes into account, that within human geography in general and certainly also in German human geography, there were hardly any theoreticians to be found, with whom one could in depth discuss the issues at stake. Thus Werlen forcefully put the development of a systematic social theoretical basis for human geography on the agenda. In the mean time the human geography scene has changed drastically, both in German speaking continental Europe as well as in the Anglo-Saxon geographic community. As far as they had access to his writings the older generation hardly took notice of the contents of Werlen’s thoughts. However, the younger generation of geographers in the German speaking part of continental Europe enthusiastically adopted these new inflammatory ideas,
which looked so refreshing in the still rather conservative world of academic human geography. The early opponents blamed Werlen to be a ‘space-exorcist’, depriving geography from its traditional object of research. But they were soon not heard or taken seriously anymore. Werlen’s social constructivist theory of space and place opened the opportunity to develop an emancipatory and critical approach within human geography, without necessarily also embracing Marxist ideas. The old geographic traditions were shaken and a new kind of human geography was born, at least within the German speaking part of the world.

((2)) At the same time in the Anglo-Saxon world a number of other angry young men also renewed the human geographic theoretic traditions. Partly these were the radical geographers inspired by Marxist traditions, and partly these were the proponents of what later was called the ‘Cultural Turn’ within human geography. Both extensively explored grand and less-grand theoretical foundations for innovative and engaging human geographic research, soon followed by a broad post-structuralist turn. On the one hand this created a social-theoretically well informed international academic community within human geography, which had the potential to pick up Werlen’s endeavour after the translation of his PhD thesis into English (Werlen, 1993). On the other hand, his approach, was overtaken by a number of newer developments because of a number of reasons: (1) Werlen’s approach established a kind of grand (meta-)narrative focussed on developing an action theoretical approach to the social construction of space and place, which was easily put aside in the newly awakening post-modern view of ‘any-thing goes’. Why bother, there are so many other interesting narratives as well? So while Werlen’s ambition clearly demanded an intensive debate and refining elaborations to come to a new comprehensive approach for human geography, this never really emerged. A second reason (2) is that his thinking was still strongly associated with the late-modern theorising, with its strong focus on intentional, purposeful and deliberate actions linearly oriented towards a better future. His argumentation was simply, though falsely, lumped together with many other modernist and structuralist approaches by the rather sweeping post-modern critique. Also (3) the as-alisation of space at central stage, but also limits himself to rather classi-cal concepts of space and does not take it any further. Here also there is a chance for developing and applying this in relation to the topical issues at stake (see e.g. also Peter Sloterdijk, 2004, with his concepts of bubbles, globes and foam in his Spheres).

((4)) Certainly developing these aspects further, would bring in a number nuances and similarities with other streams of thought, which would also devalue the profile of Werlen’s action theoretic approach. The concept of ‘practice’, the concept of ‘inter-action’ or ‘relation’, and of de-centring actually also offer a number of bridging concepts, which could not only serve the refining of Werlen’s approach, but could also serve as a vehicle to transport his ideas to others parts of our human geographic community. It is self-evident that many of these issues also play a role in day-to-day research practices, where these theories are put in used or declined.

Research practices

((5)) Formulating a theory is one thing, putting it into use is something else. Here we see the working of the political economy of ideas in its full breath. While Werlen’s approach, notwithstanding some shortcomings or loose ends, made a very substantial and important contribution to the human geographic thinking, and built a sound socio-theoretical basis for human geographic research, we also observe that there is still much to do. Here we see that not theoretical lines of
argumentation count, but the scientific geometries of power and the political economy of ideas play a central role. In this respect geography at large is still the very practical and theoretically superficial discipline it has always been.

(6) If we return to a few of the clues the action theoretic approach by Werlen offers us for further development, we note that even though a more detailed theoretical elaboration or further development would be needed and is also indicated by the open ends listed above, many researchers refrain from doing so. In stead many theoretical streams of thought are rather uncritically employed, and naively applied. Here choices are not geared by theoretical deliberations but by what is fashionable and trendy. Even critiques are often formulated in line with the usual critiques, while the critique of the critique is difficult to find (Ernst, 2008).

In case of Werlen’s work of course a collection of critical notes were gathered in Meusburger (1999). It is in this respect that Werlen’s action-theoretic approach did not find many followers, even though is exemplarily applied on a great number of different fields with human geography. In practice often concepts and theories are used in a rather eclectic and unreflected way. To give an example in relation to Werlen’s action theoretic approach, it is clear that in his theoretical approach there is a strong emphasis and maybe even a too strong emphasis on individual motives and drives for spatial action. As such it puts the modernistic idea of ‘makeability’ of society and the deliberate social construction of space in the foreground, even though – following Giddens – he recognises the important role of unintended consequences of human actions and the restrictive role of power in this process. Many of the critiques have addressed this believe in voluntarism of human actions. In day-to-day research practices, especially since the 1990s, many young researchers felt attracted by post-structuralist thinking, although hardly any of them addressed the way these theoretical traditions could be linked and possibly be merged, as is for example suggested by the work of Schatzki (Knorr Cetina, Schatzki & van Savigny, 2001; Schatzki, 2012). In stead in practice many researchers with respect to the issue of power, preferred naïve post-structuralist thinking, working in the tradition of the early Michel Foucault. In doing so they traced almost any social phenomenon back to the omni-present issue of (distributed) power, without reflecting on how this actually informs us in our everyday activities. Although Foucault’s contribution to the social theorising of social practices is substantial and theoretically inspiring, in many practical cases the concept of power seems to have become rather empty. If it is everywhere, it is nowhere. At the same time these same practitioners often claim to be critical about power, even though their research seldomly leads to concrete suggestions how to do anything about it, since their unreflected conceptualisations do not provide the necessary tools. We remain the prisoners of dominant discursive powers. Here Werlen’s action theoretic approach could have infused this new way of thinking about power and power geometries further and could have addressed they way what the room to manoeuvring single situated actors can have in constructing new (spatial) realities (Caldwell, 2012). It is in these respects that one notices how practical good theorising can be (Lewin, 1952, p. 169).

(7) In a similar way, in research practice, the term ‘practice’ is often used without really knowing what one is talking about. Of course in the rather pragmatic geographic tradition also the connotation of practice as ‘not theoretic’ but based in ‘real life’, also makes the use of the term attractive and in current times in which ‘valorisation of scientific research’ is high up on the agenda, as politically correct. Also in many versions of post-structuralist theoretical thinking the term ‘action’ is e.g. replaced by ‘practice’, mainly because it is politically incorrect to use the term ‘action’ in this framework. Action is ‘out’ because it is associated with modernistic and causal thinking, against which most poststructuralists are railing against. Again we observe the workings of a political economy of terms and theories rather than an elaborate elaboration of theoretical differences and of their practical consequences. However, the conceptualisation of a practice as an assemblage (Delanda, 2006) of different elements which happen to come together in a specific situation and at a specific point in time, including physical conditions, social settings, institutional structures, resources, discourses about meanings, motives and intentions, path dependencies and future prospects, etc. could productively combine these different aspects and embed Werlen’s action theoretic approach in such larger framework of ‘practice’. With his reception of the work of Giddens, Werlen even provides a good ‘assist’, which one needed to score. But again, not theoretic arguments are at stake, but a rather naïve research practice is in play.

(8) In research practice this has also lead to the enthusiastic adoption of the idea that in practice we also can identify other causal and acting powers beyond the acting subject. In Actor Network Theories (Latour, 2007) these are denoted as ‘actants’, but also this seems to be subject to the naïvety of everyday research practices, as the subject in interaction with other subjects and with the material objects involved can not be separated from these objects, as also subjects need to be conceptualised as inherently de-centred. Relationism and ‘Inter-Action’ thus would be a research frontier, not just in relational theories but also in action theories.

(9) Nowadays, human geography seems to deal with almost everything. This is on the one hand logical and also very useful, as all activities and events on this planet have their spatiality, but on the other hand it is surprising that hardly any geographers reflect on the conceptualisation of space in their own research. It is often noticed that space is conceptualised by most geographers as rather naïve everyday Euclidean Space (Seebacher, 2012). This sounds weird for geographers but is nevertheless largely true. Especially in this respect Werlen makes an important point and provides practical human geographic research with a programme. Here Werlen provides very useful and needed, but as mentioned above also need to taken further.

(10) In general, what we can observe in geographic research practice, we have forgotten how to constructively build better theories for addressing future practical problems together and engage not just in a specific theory or school of thought but in a theoretical debate. Even though, one of the great achievements of Werlen’s programme on ‘Society
and Space’ was to contribute to the socio-theoretic foundations of human geographic research, it needs to be developed further in the directions briefly coined above, to emerge not just as a full fledged coherent theoretical building but also as a research practice.

Endnote
1 See also http://www.ru.nl/gpm/actueel/alexander-von/past-lectures/ for a number of contributions to the Alexander von Humboldt Lecture Series on ‘Spatial practices’ in 2011 at the Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands.

Literature


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