Human geography - a social science?

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Abstract:
Traditionally, human geography conceived itself generally speaking as a science of spatial processes. Today this may still serve as a description of its research interests. However, if human geography is supposed to be a real human or social science, it has to develop its theory focusing on human activities. This lecture will expose the language pragmatics approach and its relevance for human geography. It will present communication, particularly the notion of speech act as the key concept for the analysis of social structures and processes of structuration. Within this theoretical frame the role of space and some major consequences for applied human geography will be elaborated.

1. The copernican revolution within geography

According to my understanding of human geography there is a kind of copernican revolution going on. It is not a simple paradigm change, but one which turns the relation of two centers of attention upside down. Therefore, I speak of a copernican revolution. I would like to describe this move by two ideal types.

The one position takes geography as a science about space, spatial processes or generally spatial phenomena. This is the traditional paradigm of geography. The second and newer position regards this as a problematic perspective. According to the second position, geography should not define itself as a science of space or spatial phenomena. Rather, geography should listen to modern epistemology and theory of science, and it should focus therefore on natural processes or on human activities instead. With other words, this second position wants to transform human geography form spatial into a social science.

A broad range of different geographies are much closer to the first ideal type then to the second. I dare to say, that the first ideal type even represents the geographic mainstream to a considerable degree. Still many geographers take space as a thing, which causes effects. At the same time they regard space as a kind of box or platform that contains human activities and material objects. And in addition to these two characteristics, space is not an empty container, but it is the container with its content. Therefore space is also produced by the activities and with help of the objects that space contains.

Fig. 1: The traditional conception(s) of space.
According to the second perspective space is neither a thing, nor a container nor a surface. Space does not cause anything, it does not contain anything, and we cannot observe it. On the contrary, it is an instrument for observation, it is a mean to describe, what we perceive.

If we think of the space of colors or of a vektor-space in mathematics we understand this notion of space. From our lessons in geometry and algebra we remember that we are able to conceive spaces with one, two, three or with \( n \) dimensions. And these dimension often represent distance or time. But they may represent as well any other quality. Seen from this perspective, what geographers usually call space is either just one of innumerable spaces, or it is no space at all, but a material thing, for instance an area or a sector of the surface of the earth.

According to the second ideal type, space is a frame of interpretation. It provides dimensions in order to draw distinctions —, and that's it. It is a very abstract and general concept. It is so to say meta-order. The mainstream geographers, however, mistake their onw instruments of observation and communication for the object that they want to study.

This critique does not mean, that geographers are interested in the wrong issues. No, on the contrary, but they try to develop their research and theories and a conceptual basis, which cannot be acceptet from contemporary philosophy of science. Geographers should at least accept two things. First: Not the cartesian dualism, but the problem, that it should solve. Second, the notion of space as frame of interpretation. These two things are almost enough. Why? By the distinction of res extensa and res cogitans Descartes tried to solve the problem, that some parts of the world are obviously organized in a deterministic way, but others not. How can we understand free will and mechanics as aspects of the same world?

Descartes proposed an ontological division of the world. Today philosophers rather tend to say, that we should think of one world, but of different levels of organization, which provide high degrees of independence. So matter, life, meaning and communication exist all the same way. But they are organized differently. Their dynamics are highly autonomous, and we should therefore use different languages on each level of reality. Consequently, empirical science should develop different methodologies to investigate natural and social phenomena. And therefore, human geography should take into account this methodological dualism as well. Instead of focusing on space it should focus on human activities, on their meaning and on bio-physical items, conditions and consequences that are involved.
Now we see quite clearly the copernican revolution. The relation between space and activities is turned upside down. Traditional geography took space as a container, as a cause, and as a consequence of activities. Social scientific geography, on the contrary, regards space as an aspect of activities. Spaces are the frames of interpretation which actors apply to conceive and plan their actions.

In this respect, space becomes again an important concept for geography. According to the dualistic methodology, human geographers should investigate and empirically reconstruct those subjective spaces, in order to understand, analyze and evaluate human activities. We may still speak of spatial or temporal structures and distributions. But we should know, that it is just one of many possible conceptions of space which we geographers use to describe what happens on earth. And we should avoid to speak of space as if it was a material object, as if there was a space out there, that we may capture on our maps.

To conclude this section I would like to give you an example of space in this non-traditional sense. It is taken from a study in which I investigated the contact networks and the choreography of children in pre-school age. This work was inspired by time geography. For children in that age the mobility is highly dependent on adults. Using a questionary I wanted to know something about their possibilities to meet playmates and playgrounds.
But how should I represent their world? I decided to do it with two simple questions. The first represented distance, not in meters, but in spheres around the home. We tend to use certain words to distinguish different spheres of our activities. So I tried to use the same "space" in my questionary. The second question referred to the circumstance if kids were allowed to go to places on their own or only accompanied by some adults. So I have used these two spaces to represent an areal-differentiation of everyday activities.

2. A successfull failure within philosophy

After having accepted to develop human geography as a social science, we have to determine, how to represent human activities and bio-physical conditions. Among those geographers who try to develop human geography as a social science, the so called action theory has received much attention. This is mainly due to Anthony Giddens interest in the spatio-temporal organization of social life, and to Benno Werlen's pioneering geographical reception of Weber, Popper, Schütz and other classics of action theory. I would roughly locate myself within this tradition. However, I am much more influenced by the work of Habermas, and I emphasis the notion or speech act. In order to explain why, I have to tell you something about another paradigm change, which, however, took place in philosophy, and which just an ordinary, but not a copernican revolution.

Influenced by positivistic thinking, in the first decades of our century, a movement within philosophy tried to re-establish philosophy as a "real" science. Linguistic methods should be the key to reach this goal. The idea was, that an ideal language would exclude all problems of communication. Consequently, the philosophers should be able to talk undistorted about real philosophical problems. This project failed completely. However, the debates about the relation between language and philosophy were extremely fruitful. A first result of this linguistic turn was the insight that philosophy and science are not primarily about perceiving, conceiving and other mental operations, but rather about saying, writing, describing and other communicative operations.
Herbert Schnädelbach, a German philosopher, described the history of philosophy as the sequence of the ontological, the mentalistic and the linguistic paradigm. It sounds rather paradoxically, but it was actually the failure of the linguistic turn which provoked the change from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language. Within language philosophy, all central problems like knowledge, truth, morality, esthetics and so on, are discussed by analyzing verbal communication. Language replaced thought as the medium of meaning. Outside of language, there is no clear thought possible! This is the essence of Wittgensteins famous argument against private languages.

So, the main results of the failure of the linguistic turn are these:

- There is no ideal language, but only many different ordinary languages.
- Philosophy cannot be reduced to a scientific method in the traditional sense.
- Yet, philosophy is about the use of language. Therefore, philosophy is mainly about communication.
- If there are only ordinary languages, their use is always imbedded in a life-form. Therefore philosophy is a reflexive social practice. With other words: Philosophy merges with sociology.

This story is an important background for our ambition to establish human geography as a science! It is also the background for a shift of focus from action to speech acts, which I will introduce now.

### 3. From action to speech acts

The notion of "action" represents certain activities as an intentional behaviour. An action is regarded as an activity which follows a purpose. It wants to change a situation by using certain means. By this, actions produce intended and unintended consequences. We can say, that actions are steered by mental processes, and that they have a teleological structure. The concept of action is used in communication and in our thoughts. It provides a structure to our activities. It refers selectively to those aspects which are relevant for achieving a certain goal. By thinking and speaking about actions, we are regulating our own activities and those of others. We describe, explain, allow and criticise what we do. The concept of action divides our activities into series of coherent units.

Society is mainly structured by communicative activities. Language philosophers realized that there is a very important difference between simple actions, like picking berries or working with a hammer, and speech acts. The reason is that we can eat berries alone. But in order to realize a speech act we need a partner who reacts. Therefore, speech acts entail another action. They are units of social behavior. A few example may reveal how most of social life is structured by speech acts: to describe, to ask, to deny, to lie, to demand, to order, to promise, to guess, to propose, to declare, to accept, to criticise, to swear, to tell, to offer and so on. Whenever we do something with words or even with signs, we execute a speech act.

By demanding, ordering, allowing and so on, we are basically able to regulate all kinds of activities. And it is important to see, that language provides us the possibility to talk about everything. Therefore, language is the meta-institution of social reality. This is the reason why I can say, that the conception of speech acts is actually the key to the structuration of society! However, society is not built up by speech acts alone. Speech acts may structure the metabolism of society, but the bio-physical work cannot be done by words. Therefore, action theory relies on both, on speech acts and on simple acts.

This is where I differ significantly from Giddens and from Werlen. They do not use the concept of speech acts. I cannot explain it here in detail, so let me put it extremely simple: Their understanding of action theory does not correspond to
language philosophy, but to the mentalistic paradigm. Consequently, their concept, that builds up social reality is not the speech act, which includes and binds the action of the other. Rather, it is intersubjectivity, which refers only to similar perspectives. This drawing may illustrate the difference:

Fig. 4:

**Two ways to conceive the interaction of A and B**

![Diagram](54x768)  ![Diagram](54x658)

"action / intersubjectivity"  "speech act / validity claims"

According to my understanding, intersubjectivity is only a necessary conception, but the notion of speech acts goes beyond it. Speech acts bind activities of different people by claiming a certain behavior. Let me explain this. Speech acts are successful if their words reveal a specific reaction. For instance, a question is successful if it was understood, and if I get an answer. An order was successful if the other did what I wanted him or her to do. This means that the success of the speech act depends on the interpretation by the addressee. Does he understand what I say? Does he accept what I say?

With other words: The other has to accept the validity claims that are involved with my speech act. Intersubjectivity or mutual understanding is certainly a necessary condition for this. However, the concept of validity claim captures exactly that specific form of intersubjectivity, which is so to say the glue or the cement for stable social constructions. According to Jürgen Habermas there are three classes of validity claims which refer to three different realms of reality:

Tab. 1: Classes of validity claims according to Jürgen Habermas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validity claim</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>truth</td>
<td>objective world (facts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rightness</td>
<td>social world (conventions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sincerity</td>
<td>subjective world (experiences)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If an addressee accepts the validity claims, the speech act and the reactions were both successful and come to an end. The interesting case, however, is that the addresse rejects a validity claim. He says: "Well, this is not true!" or "This is not right!" or "I do not believe you!". His rejection is another speech act with another set of validity claims. The speakers may now shout at each other or start a fight. Or they may try to convince each other with good arguments.

You see, the possibility of argumentation is a necessary element of all communication! Even a strict order cannot prevent the addressee from arguing against it. Generally speaking, argumentation, or the discussing of validity claims, is the only possibility to generate and to reproduce mutual understanding. Therefore, argumentation is of outstanding importance for the structuration of society. Habermas has seen that quite clearly. And, inspired by Max Webers typology of rationalities, he formulated two ideal types of processes of argumentation. Habermas distinguishes between instrumental and communicative rationality. He parallels these forms of rationality with two forms of societal integration.
Tab. 2: Forms of rationality and coordination of actions according to Habermas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumental rationality</th>
<th>Communicative rationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>systemic integration</td>
<td>social integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(coordination of actions by consequences of actions)</td>
<td>(coordination of actions by mutual understanding)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instrumental rationality refers to communications which focuses on validity claims of truth or efficiency exclusively. This is typically the case in all social institutions which have a rather fixed functional order or a division of labour, like in administration, in production lines or in the army. The aim of such organizations is to maximize some output, but not to produce mutual understanding. Habermas calls these parts of society the system. We must not confuse his notion of system with those of Giddens or Luhmann, which are rather different. Anyway, if actions are coordinated only by their outcomes, Habermas speaks of systemic integration.

Communicative rationality, on the contrary, refers to all interactions which strive for mutual understanding and for concensus. This requires unrestricted argumentation. It is allowed to dispute all kinds of validity claims, and all interested persons are allowed to contribute reasons or arguments. Unrestricted argumentation must not be mistaken for a situation outside of power. Rather, legitimation, which is an important resource of power, beside possession and violence, is reproduced or transformed by arguments. Because argumentation as the only way to build mutual understanding, Habermas speaks of social integration. Here actions are coordinated by the perspectives or by the understandings of the actors.

Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas were able to show, that the reproduction of society and of personalities depends heavily on communicative rationality. This point is important, because it means, that if we do not accept communicative rationality as an ideal for social relations, we do not accept social life as we know it. This is the key argument for their conception of discours ethics.

Conflicts about social structures are usually about justice, fairness, rights of minorities or other normative issues. Norms are the rules upon which social relations are built. Now, discourse ethics says, that normative conflicts should be solved only by argumentation among all affected people. The important thing is not to reach a concensus, but to strive for it without pressure, and above all, to let all interested people participate, either directly or by their advocates. The core idea is, that every argument, wherever it may come from, has to be considered.

Once again we see, that communicative rationality is a kind of meta-institution for normative structures, hence for society. There are no absolute reasons which would force us to accept the ideal of communicative reason. But it seems that it is in our long term self-interest to work for communicative structures. These are the normative implications that Habermas and Apel developed from speech act theory.

It is important for social sciences, because our analyses of social structures will always enter the disputes about these very structures. So if we like it or not, our contributions will always have a critical effect. They may be used as arguments for or against certain social conditions. Speech act theory provides us rich conceptual instruments to analyse the structuration of society and to evaluate the rationality of discourses. We can also use these concepts as a frame of reference in order to reflect or to examine our own role as experts and our contribution to public debates.

And this is what I want to do now in respect of planning in a broad sense.
4. Planning as an escort service

Traditionally the planner had to develop a new and optimized spatial order on his paper, much like architects and engineers constructed buildings and machines. It did not matter that his objects were public infrastructure or zones of communal land use plans. Of course this image does not correspond to our reality. Today planning is not understood exclusively as a purpose oriented process of construction. It is not regarded as a silent and isolated process of optimization. Rather, it is an act of balancing between conflicting interests, and quite often it is a task of mediation, but in any case it is a communicative work.

Planners contribute specific speech acts to a chain or a network of speech acts. At the beginning of this encompassing communicative process, some people expressed dissatisfaction or desires, some investments were done or some new laws were introduced. This was perhaps followed by the forming of interests, by discussions and by public campaigns. There are different views and opinions in respect of what should be done. From now on planning has open ears, and it starts to contribute descriptions, analyses, evaluations, scenarios, visions and so on. They serve for future debates and for the preparation of decisions. After some political decisions have been taken, after the rough lines of projects have been fixed, a process of more technical detail planning may follow - with or without public participation.

I am not a planner, and although I am a geographer, I never had training in planning. Therefore I talk about planning mainly from the perspective of a politically active citizen and of a social scientist. From this position, I see planning processes as a form of social structuration which extends socially and temporally far beyond the work of the planner himself or herself. The planner is only one voice among many others. But he or she occupies a strategically central position.

The planners position is strategically important because of technical knowledge and experience, because of the status as expert, because of easy access to information and insider-information, because of legitimation by the mission, and because of the availability of certain resources. However in all these respects other positions may compete. And everything what the planner does may be questioned or rejected. So what first seems to be a comfortable place may be turned into a battlefield. I agree, this is the worst case scenario. But still, I would like to express these two extreme positions with this drawing:

Fig. 5 / 6: The planner as the center of a process / planning as escorting and supporting a communicative process from a decentered position.
On the left side the planner is the center of a process. He is so to say the relais station for all the important communication, and he possesses many possibilities to manage the process. On the right side, the planner is still in the center. But this time his position is more like a prison. All the other involved positions are quite hostile towards him, and he is forced to react. Well, maybe the reality is often somewhere in the middle. But I think the ideal position should not be in the middle, because both images make the position of the planner into an absolute. He is either the king or the victim.

If we follow the ideal of communicative rationality, all claims and arguments concerning social conflicts should have a chance to be discussed. The planner cannot solve this task on his own. First there has to be a legal frame that secures the necessary conditions for a communicative process. Then there have to be politicians and representatives of interest-groups who favour argumentation against political power plays. Finally, the affected lay persons and citizens have to find a way to organize themselves in order to be able to participate. All this is difficult to realize, and it needs a lot of trust and co-operation. Yet, this could be seen as a task for planning, beside the more technical work.

Beside analysing problems, drawing maps and elaborating scenarios, the planner would try to provide the best possible conditions for argumentation for all potentially involved people. Together with others, he tries to establish a public sphere of high communicative quality. However, it would be illusory to believe that power struggles could be avoided. Yet, every good argument, every appeal to ethical standards and to responsibilities will have an effect on the decision makers. Arguments are a legitimizing capital, which the power in democracies always needs. This communicative conception of planning involves a shift in
perspectives. The task is not only defined by the authorities, by politicians or by land owners. Rather, it is a kind of ethical project. There is a kind of professional ethos involved. There is a responsibility for the functioning and for the further development of democratic systems and of civil society. Maybe this is supported by the authorities - but maybe not. Whatsoever, planners could themselves debate their role within society, and develop an influence on political culture.

I would like to see planning not as a reconstruction of spatial structures, but as a kind of escorting and supporting of a public communicative process. This may be expressed by an image where the planner is not the center, but at a decentered position within a large network.

At least in Switzerland I observe that planning has become more and more a public process. Planners may be invited to make presentation for exhibitions, and the newspapers will report about it. Citizens have the possibility to deposit claims, remarks and proposals. However, often only well organized interest-groups, like political parties, business associations or environmental organizations, have really an important voice. I doubt, that the affected people are always well represented by these organizations. And to often also the planners or the authorities seem to conceive themselves as the center of a process - despite of many words on open and participative planning. At least in Switzerland there is still a need for further developments.

Well, this was only a social geographer and local activist speaking about planning.