Thinking Geographically

PETER JACKSON

ABSTRACT: Based on a recent presentation at the GA Annual Conference (Manchester 2006), this article presents an argument for the power of thinking geographically, emphasising the discipline's grammar (its concepts and theories) as well as its vocabulary (a virtually endless list of place-names). The article makes a case for four key concepts: space and place, scale and connection, proximity and distance, and relational thinking. These ideas are then put to work in addressing some of the ethical complexities facing contemporary consumers, including the charitable demands of 'caring at a distance'. The article concludes that thinking geographically offers a uniquely powerful way of seeing the world and making connections between scales, from the global to the local.

Introduction

When you meet people at a party and tell them that you're a geographer, they tend to ask you about distant places, capital cities and longest rivers. In my experience, they rarely ask you about globalisation, sustainability, inequality or the other big issues about which geographers actually have a lot to say. The public perception of geography is as a fact-based rather than conceptual discipline. This article is an attempt to challenge this *Trivial Pursuit* view of geography; it argues against the view that our discipline is just a gazetteer of place-names or a list of imports and exports, and makes a case for the power of thinking geographically. Geography, I argue, enables a unique way of seeing the world, of understanding complex problems and thinking about inter-connections at a variety of scales (from the global to the local). Demonstrating the power of geographical thinking might be one way of addressing geography's 'tired and dated content' (QCA, 2005), helping to reverse the seemingly relentless fall in student numbers, and increasing our confidence to take more risks in what and how we teach.

A good place to start this argument is with the distinction that David Lambert (2004) makes between geography's *vocabulary* (an apparently endless list of place-names) and its *grammar* (the concepts and theories that help us make sense of all those places). But what concepts and theories would you choose as constituting the heart of our subject, contributing uniquely to our understanding of the world? The Action Plan for Geography (DfES/GA/RGS-IBG, 2006) lists five concepts: place, connectedness, scale, process and skills. There are many other possibilities: inter-dependence, environment, sustainability, globalisation, etc. some of which we share with other disciplines[1]. My own list is slightly different (see Table 1) and is based on several pairs of related terms[2]. Let me present a case for the power of these four concepts and then put them to work in the analysis of a specific geographical issue.

Space and place

The nature of space and place, and the distinction between these terms, has long been debated in geography. For Tuan (1977), place is humanised space, an abstract world made real through human inhabitation, through the investment of emotion and the attribution of meaning. This view has been challenged recently by Massey (2004) who argues that space is no less concrete, grounded and real than place. (We will return to her arguments later.) Harvey (1989) provides a powerful way of understanding the transformation of space within late-modernity through his description of the process of 'time–space compression' by which the world is made smaller through successive rounds of capitalist investment, leading to technological, social, political and, ultimately, cultural change. Some sociologists have argued that time-space compression is eradicating the particularity of place, leading to a placeless planet, or what Castells describes as a 'space of flows' (1996, p. 12). Others have argued against this gloomy prediction of the erosion of local distinctiveness,

Table 1
Key concepts in geography

space and place
scale and connection
proximity and distance
relational thinking

including Massey's (1994) powerful assertion of a progressive or global sense of place in which places are characterised by porous boundaries and inter-connections rather than by fixed identities and impenetrable borders. For Massey and others, the distinctiveness of place is about the *routes* that connect them with other places and other times rather than about people's assertions of a timeless and indissoluble rootedness in a particular locality. This is, for Castree (2003), the ultimate paradox of place: that places are both unique and connected to other places.

Scale and connection

Geographers frequently talk about a hierarchy of scales, from the body ('the geography closest in') to the world, working through a series of intermediate scales from urban to regional, national to international. An alternative, and I would argue a preferable, way of thinking about scale is to focus on the connections between scales. This is what Roberts refers to, using a cinematic analogy, as the geographer's capacity for zooming in and zooming out (cited in Jackson, 1996), demonstrating how decisions taken at the local level have global consequences and how the decisions of global corporations have differential effects in different localities. An excellent example of this kind of analysis is Smith's (1993) essay on homelessness in New York where he talks about the way that the plight of individual homeless people on the Lower East Side was a consequence of changes taking place at a variety of other scales, including the decisions of real-estate investors, planners and city governors. The contours of change extend to the international scale and encompass both economic and cultural processes, as has been argued by Zukin (1982) in her analysis of the creation of a real-estate market in luxury 'loft living' in Lower Manhattan which led to the displacement of poorer residents in adjacent neighbourhoods such as the Lower East Side. But Smith's argument goes on to show that it is not just capital that is so adept at 'jumping scales' when greater profits are to be had in one place rather than another. Smith also shows how local activists in the Lower East Side were also able to resist the seemingly relentless tide of gentrification and displacement by showing that what was happening in one neighbourhood (Tompkins Square) had the potential to unite people in vulnerable places elsewhere in the city

and beyond, as depicted in one piece of graffiti that read 'Tompkins Square is everywhere'.

Proximity and distance

My third key concept focuses on ideas of proximity and distance. Here, my argument is not just about physical distance as measured in miles or kilometres but about perceptions of social or imagined distance. We are all aware of the extent to which distant places can be made to feel closer by television or the internet, for example. A wonderful demonstration of the power of information technology to overcome distance was the response of the GA to the Asian tsumani on Boxing Day 2005. By the time pupils were returning to school in early January 2006, a network of teachers across the UK had created a fantastic set of educational resources to help the pupils make sense of the disaster, including material on the physical causes of such environmental catastrophes and information about their human consequences and social and political ramifications. While this might demonstrate our ability to use technology and inter-personal networks to respond rapidly to events in distant places, the days and weeks following the disaster demonstrated unequivocally that such places remain physically inaccessible to even the most determined relief efforts, as has happened repeatedly in other remote parts of the world.

But geography also teaches us that such remoteness is socially constructed rather than an inevitable consequence of distance. As my colleague Danny Dorling's work on social and spatial inequality demonstrates, we can sometimes be stirred to care for 'distant strangers' more readily than we can be to express concern for the inequalities that exist almost literally on our doorsteps[3]. The extent of social inequalities that persist in our cities (whether measured in terms of child poverty, educational disadvantage, food insecurity or a host of other indicators) is a sad indictment of the failure of our geographical imagination to care for those 'closer to home'[4]. I return to these issues in the case study, below.

Relational thinking

My fourth concept is of a slightly different order from the pairs of concepts I have discussed so far. It refers to the way in which we think about

differences and similarities (whether conceived in terms of gender, race or class, for example) by contrasting geographies of self and other. One of the classic texts here, of great geographical relevance, is Said's study of *Orientalism* (1978), where he shows how Western constructions of the East reveal as much, if not more, about those who are the authors of such constructions as they do about those who are the object of such Orientalist representations. Sadly, the power of Said's argument remains all too apparent in contemporary political discourse about the global 'war on terror', as Gregory has described with such telling effect in his geographical account of the 'colonial present' in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq (Gregory, 2004).

Relational thinking also suggests that constructions of us and them, self and other, East and West, often demonstrate a complicated mix of desire and dread, so that the object of fear also becomes an object of fascination, whose power to seduce and enthral needs to be tamed and controlled. Geographers have understood the power of relational thinking for many years, though they may not have described their understanding in these terms. I am thinking, for example, of all the work on uneven development, where the centre grows at the expense of the periphery, the North at the cost of the South. This is a vital area of geographical enquiry where the economics of inequality and exploitation are closely connected to political geographies of oppression and cultural geographies of domestication (in the full sense of that very loaded term).

Thinking geographically about consumer ethics

How, then, might we apply these ideas to a specific area of current geographical concern? How might these concepts and ideas help us resolve some of the complexities and contradictions that affect our everyday lives and those of our students? Let me take the example of consumer ethics, not just in terms of the minority of consumers who define themselves as self-consciously 'ethical' (such as those involved in the Fair Trade movement) but more widely in terms of the ethical issues that underlie all our consumption practices. Think, for example, of the extent to which our everyday consumption talk is shot through with ethical and moral undertones – in comparisons between

'decent' and 'junk' food, or the importance that is attached to having a 'proper meal' and what this implies about being a 'good mother'.

Geographers are well aware of the ethical dilemmas that beset contemporary consumers[5]. Examples include the tension between buying imported organic fruit and vegetables and the wish to reduce 'food miles' by purchasing local produce. Or the impulse to buy fresh produce from the local farmers' market versus concerns about issues of quality and standards (which might be better regulated in the average high-street supermarket)[6]. Or the desire to purchase 'local' food versus the need to support Third World producers. Or the paradox of buying eco-friendly products having driven to the supermarket in a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Let me introduce a specific example in order to tease out some of these dilemmas and, I hope, to demonstrate the power of thinking geographically. One of the most compelling recent appeals to consume more ethically was Oxfam's public invitation to purchase a goat in order to reduce world poverty (see Figure 1). Introduced shortly before Christmas 2005, the campaign sought to persuade people to buy a goat for their loved ones rather than to purchase a more conventional gift. A card was then sent to the intended recipient indicating that the money that would have been spent on their present had gone instead to a charitable cause, enabling Oxfam to purchase a goat for a 'distant stranger' in the developing world. My initial reaction to the campaign was quite positive, seeing it as an example of the kind of 'caring at a distance' that geographers are prone to support. The Oxfam

Figure 1: The Oxfam goat. Photo: Oxfam Unwrapped.

goat is clearly part of a wider social movement to Make Poverty History through the purchase of charity wristbands and attendance at rock concerts endorsed by Sir Bob Geldof and other celebrities.

There are, though, a number of ethical dilemmas involved in this kind of campaign, which geographical thinking might help clarify. Buying a goat, for example, may sometimes seem very little different from buying any other commodity. This is how the Oxfam campaign was covered in one newspaper: 'Never mind the iPod, the surprise hit of the Christmas shopping season was the goat' (*The Times*, 21 February 2006). The language used here to describe a charitable appeal provokes, in me at least, a sense of unease. It is compounded by a subsequent reference in the same article to other 'best-sellers' available from Christian Aid including a fishing net for Mali (£35), a water tap in Bolivia (£24), two months' salary for a teacher in India (£30), two sheep in Senegal (£80) and a mosquito net for an Angolan family (£11). The almost random list of products, places and prices does little to persuade the reader of the ethical seriousness of the project (although I should emphasise that this is the way the newspaper reported the issue rather than the way the charity chose to represent itself).

There is a significant literature on the difference between the moral economies of gift-giving and commodity exchange (see Carrier, 1995, for a useful introduction to these issues). Perhaps the transformation from charitable giving to a commodified form of monetary exchange can be explained by the declining success of traditional forms of fund raising? There has been a lot of discussion about the effects of 'donor fatigue' and recent campaigns have had very different levels of public response (compare the immediate outpouring of sympathy and practical help in response to the Asian tsunami with the delayed and poorly organised response to the Rwandan genocide or the Sudanese famine). Oxfam's 'buy a goat' campaign is part of a wider transformation of the charity whereby their high-street shops are coming increasingly to resemble their mainstream commercial competitors (see Gregson and Crewe, 2003). But, as Gregson and Crewe remind us, charity has never been 'pure and simple'; its motives were always mixed, as Victorian ideas of *noblesse oblige*, enlightened self-interest and the 'deserving poor' should surely remind us.

Drawing on the previous discussion, I would argue that geographical ideas of proximity and

distance can help us chart a course through these difficult waters. The slogan 'charity begins at home' suggests that it may be easier (less personally demanding) to make a financial contribution to the needs of distant strangers than to give practical help to those closer to home. Buying a goat is a quick, impersonal transaction that involves little more than a transitory, marketised relationship. There is no demand on our time and no real commitment of the self. At best, the receipt of a card from Oxfam may make us think a little more deeply about global inequality. At worst, the campaign simply allows us to parade our generosity to our family and friends in a paternalistic gesture of guilt-free giving.

The Oxfam campaign was also criticised for its naïve approach to environmental sustainability. The World Land Trust, whose patron is Sir David Attenborough, argued that 'charities like Oxfam and Christian Aid have forgotten that goats eat everything. Camels, which Oxfam offers for £95, are even more destructive'. John Burton, chief executive of the World Land Trust, continued: 'They haven't thought this scheme through properly … They don't understand the connection between habitat degradation and poverty … The goat campaign may be a pleasing gift and a short-term fix for milk and meat but in the long term the quality of life for these people will slowly be reduced with devastating effect'. Whether or not these ecological claims are credible (and they are refuted by Oxfam and Christian Aid), it provides further evidence of the complexity of this apparently simple appeal to our sense of charity in the face of global inequality.

In a characteristically thoughtful essay on 'geographies of responsibility', Massey has addressed some of the dilemmas of caring at a distance (Massey, 2004). In this essay, Massey muses on the distinction between space and place raised earlier in this article. She argues against the idea that place is always local and that local places are always the victim of global forces, located elsewhere. She shows how even the most global forces emanate from particular places and that globalisation has very different effects in different places. According to Massey, the global is no less abstract than the local, and local places are not devoid of political agency. There are many different globalisations and our reaction depends on where we are located in relation to these global forces. Massey argues against a 'Russian doll' model of care and responsibility where our loyalties are nested in terms of a series of scales from the home and the neighbourhood to the

nation and the world, with our sense of responsibility declining in some linear way with increasing distance. She proposes instead a more relational way of thinking about space and place. Adapting the recent work of some feminist philosophers (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999), she argues that just as we are responsible for the past because the past continues in the present, so are distant places implicated in our 'here and now'. Rather than assuming that local places are the passive recipients of global changes emanating from elsewhere, she seeks to understand the geometries of power that link specific local places with specific forms of globalisation. These arguments recall her earlier work on a global sense of place (discussed above) where she demonstrated that places assume their specific character because of the complex flows and connections that come together in those places, rather than assuming that the world is made up of a series of geographically separate and tightly-bounded places.

Massey concludes with an argument about the need to rethink our geographical responsibility for distant places according to a more relational view of space. She asks: 'If the identities of places are … the product of relations which spread way beyond them (if we think space/place in terms of flows and (dis)connectivities rather than in terms only of territories), then what should be the political relationship to those wider geographies of connection?' (Massey, 2005, p. 11). Her answer is that 'A real recognition of the relationality of space points to a politics of connectivity' (*ibid*., p. 17) – an argument which she goes on to illustrate in terms of the recent politics of urban planning in London.

Conclusion

The arguments I have made in this article draw on recent geographical thinking about the entanglements of space and place, proximity and distance, scale and connection. I have only been able to sketch out some basic ideas in this short essay. For a more detailed and highly accessible elaboration of some related ideas, the recent Open University course books on *Living in a Globalised World* offer an excellent set of resources (Barnett *et al.*, 2006; Clark *et al.*, 2006). My argument has been that thinking geographically is a uniquely powerful way of seeing the world. While it does not provide a blueprint for addressing the kind of ethical dilemmas that I have raised here in terms of caring at a distance, it should be obvious that there are no 'right answers' or easy solutions to such complex issues. Thinking geographically does, however, provide a language – a set of concepts and ideas – that can help us see the connections between places and scales that others frequently miss. That is why we should focus on geography's grammar as well as on its endless vocabulary. That is the power of thinking geographically.

Notes

1. Compare Holloway, Rice and Valentine (2003) whose list of key concepts includes space, time, place, scale, social formations, physical systems, landscape and environment (all examined as part of a variety of traditions including the physical sciences, the social sciences and the humanities). See also Hubbard *et al.*, (2002) whose title I have borrowed for this essay.
2. See Cloke and Johnston's *Spaces of Geographical Thought* (2005) which attempts a deconstructionist reading of geography's binaries: agency and structure, state and society, culture and economy, space and place, black and white, man and woman, nature and culture, local and global, time and space.
3. For information on Danny Dorling's research on social and spatial inequalities in Britain, see http://sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/research/index.htm
4. On the politics of 'caring at a distance', see Silk (1998) and Smith (2000).
5. For an excellent and accessible introduction to these issues, see Whatmore and Clark (2006).
6. My own research addresses these dilemmas in the context of contemporary debates about food safety and consumer trust. For further information, see http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/research/jackson_full.html

References

Barnett, C., Robinson, J. and Rose, G. (eds) (2006) *A Demanding World*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Carrier, J. (1995) *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Routledge.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Castree, N. (2003) 'Place: connections and boundaries in an interdependent world', in Holloway, S.L., Rice, S.P. and Valentine, G. (eds) (2003) *Key Concepts in Geography*. London: Sage, pp. 165-85.

Clark, N., Massey, D. and Sarre, P. (eds) (2006) *A World in the Making*. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Cloke, P. and Johnston, R.J. (eds) (2005) *Spaces of Geographical Thought*. London: Sage.

DfES/GA/RGS-IBG (2006) *The Action Plan for Geography*. London: DfES/GA/RGS-IBG.

Gatens, M. and Lloyd, G. (1999) *Collective Imaginings*. London: Routledge.

Gregory, D. (2004) *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Gregson, N. and Crewe, L. (2003) *Second-Hand Cultures.* Oxford: Berg.

Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Holloway, S.L., Rice, S.P. and Valentine, G. (eds) (2003) *Key Concepts in Geography.* London: Sage.

Hubbard, P., Kitchin, R., Bartley, B. and Fuller, D. (2002) *Thinking Geographically: Space, theory and contemporary human geography*. London: Continuum.

Jackson, P. (1996) 'Only connect: approaches to human geography', in Rawling, E.M. and Dougherty, R.A. (eds) *Geography into the Twenty-First Century.* Chichester: Wiley, pp. 77-94.

Lambert, D. (2004) 'The power of geography', available at: http://www.geography.org.uk/download/NPOGPower.doc

Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Massey, D. (2004) 'Geographies of responsibility', *Geografiska Annaler,* 86B, pp. 5-18.

QCA (2005) *Geography 2004-5: Annual Report on Curriculum and Assessment.* London: QCA/05/2168.

Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Silk, J. (1998) 'Caring at a distance', *Ethics, Place and Environment,* 1, pp. 165-82.

Smith, D.M. (2000) *Moral Geographies: Ethics in a world of difference.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Smith, N. (1993) 'Homeless/global: scaling places', in Bird, J., Curtis, B., Putnam, T., Robertson, G. and Tickner, L. (eds) *Mapping the Futures: Local cultures, global change.* London: Routledge, pp. 88-119.

Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977) *Space and Place: The perspective of experience.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Whatmore, S. and Clark, N. (2006) 'Good food: ethical consumption and global change', in Clark, N., Massey, D. and Sarre, P. (eds) *A World in the Making.* Milton Keynes: The Open University, pp. 363-412.

Zukin, S. (1982) *Loft Living: Culture and capital in urban change.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Professor Peter Jackson is Professor of Human Geography at the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN (tel: 0114 222 7908; email: p.a.jackson@sheffield.ac.uk).