

What are the defining features of 'critical geography?'

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What makes geography 'critical?' This refers more to an attitude than a coherent literacy. To be critical is to question facts, to challenge assumptions, embrace radicalism, address politics, and to be comfortable with the unconventional.¹ But then, how are these critical qualities determined? In the absence of some primordial text, these qualities are defined *collectively*. What we take to be critical is understood in relation to a community of people continually negotiating its meaning among themselves. Much like the objects of its critique, critical geography is itself a socially-constructed concept.

Following that line of thought, there is a case that critical geography is redundant. As the concept gains institutional acceptance and recognition, it loses that which defines it as a counter-hegemonic discourse.² In the mid-2000s, Neil Smith warned against critical geographers accommodating themselves to the neo-liberal project.³ He saw that critical qualities are vulnerable; their meaning can become easily lost and neutralised.

This essay will not commit to the argument that criticalness is meaningless. However, it does not seek to uncover a precise, scientific meaning of the term. Critical geography is subjective.

Brian Fay identifies three features which generally characterise a critical social science:

- It is interpretivist, rather than positivist. It seeks to understand intentional social actions, not only explain their function.
- It takes into account social conditions which affect actors beyond their control.
- It has practical intent, and this is articulated in the sense that it “ties its knowledge claims to the satisfaction of human purposes and desires.”⁴

While these aren't specifically attached to geography (Fay himself is a historian), they do act as useful markers of separation between critical and uncritical approaches.

Take global warming for example, an issue which falls under the scholarly responsibility of geography. A climate researcher could tread a strictly positivist path; observe weather patterns, and simplify them to quasi-mathematical models. The models would describe what is happening in the atmosphere, and the physical processes which cause it. Our researcher could state with scientific authority that burning fossil fuels contributes to global warming. Insofar as climate science is apolitical, the analysis stops there, that's the limit of uncritical geography.

But, if global warming damages the environment, why are all these people burning fossil fuels? Now we have passed into the territory of interpretivism. A critical geographer would take the analysis further, to bring in the political context of industrial society, motorways, overproduction, war, shareholder value, and so on. Only then would we be able to understand the social conditions which compel people to burn fossil fuels. Nor would a critical geographer sit neutrally detached from the issue; their research is *directed at society*. Social theory should inform social practice

(and in turn, some have argued that practice should also inform theory.)⁵ Critical geography aims to intervene in human existence, that's what is meant by theory with practical intent.

To place critical geography in the history of the discipline – early geography was limited to observing and describing the world.⁶ Then the 'quantitative revolution'⁷ emerged along with new systematic methods of thought. Critical geography followed that moment. Whether it was a retreat from the revolution,⁸ or a second revolution in geographic thought,⁹ critical geography was also itself a product of the quantitative turn. It was the development of a theoretical geography, along with quantitative methods, which allowed the boundaries of the discipline to be pushed over.¹⁰ And as the boundaries of the discipline were challenged, geography let in not only the natural sciences, but also the humanities. As a result, geography now contains 'dissident' tendencies: marxist, anarchist, feminist, and postcolonial geographies.¹¹ These tendencies are all features of a critical geography. It's also worth noting that these radical currents already existed, and were established in the discipline before the 1960s, but they had been marginalised by the academic community.¹²

This brings us on to another feature of critical geography: its relationship with the academe. While critical geography defines itself in opposition to the status-quo of traditional geography, it directs significant attention inwards, towards the discipline. There is a tendency to target reactionary epistemology within as well as without academic structures. This is clear in the Royal Geographical Society (Institute of British Geographers), whose prominent role in the geographic community sits uncomfortably with its origins as an appendage of Empire.¹³ As such, it attracts criticism from post-colonial scholars. For example, in a commentary on the RGS-IBG, Byron, Daley *et al.* argue that "the decolonisation of geographical knowledges cannot take place while racist and colonialist structures inherited from the discipline's colonial and imperial past are maintained."¹⁴

There's more to this than a critique of colonialism in a general political context; it is aimed specifically at the RGS-IBG. The debate is an internal one, it takes place between geographers and their official *Royal Society*. Of course internal debates are normal in academia, however critical voices in geography tend to come from a position of contention with the academy. Therefore this particularly taut relationship between geographers and their academic institutions is a feature of critical geography.

Lastly, an alternative understanding of space is important. Derek Gregory asserts that a critical project in geography begins from "a critique of the concepts through which the discipline has sustained its image of the world."¹⁵ Space is one of those concepts.

Quantitative approaches by necessity rely on a geometric understanding of space. To the quantitative geographer, space is a tangible area which can be accurately mapped. It can be measured in terms of length, width, and altitude, as well as by population density, GDP per square metre, biodiversity indicators, etc. Meanwhile a critical approach includes alternative notions of social space. For example, distances can also be measured by transport cost or time,¹⁶ which doesn't line up perfectly with Euclidean space. Social spaces overlap with each other, rather than clean boundaries, they form an 'ambiguous continuity.'¹⁷ This is what sets critical geography apart, its recognition of an intangible, social understanding of space.

Notes and references

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4. Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice* (Routledge, 1975), pp. 93-95, ISBN: 978-1-138-78252-5.
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8. Ayodele Otaiku, "The Evaluation of Laws of Geography" (Kaduna, Nigeria, October 13, 2018), p. 9.
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11. Alison Blunt and Jane Wills, *Dissident Geographies* (Routledge, 2000), ISBN: 0-582-29489-4.
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15. Derek Gregory, *Ideology, Science and Human Geography* (London: Hutchinson, June 1978), p. 165, ISBN: 978-0-09-133120-7.

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