Power, Modernity, and Historical Geography

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Abstract. In the changed intellectual climate since historical geography emerged as a substantial geographical subfield, issues of power and modernity have come much to the fore. For Michel Foucault, power is less a property than a strategy and is widely distributed in cultural discourses and their settings. For Jürgen Habermas, modernity imposes a distinctive context of communications that undermines the stability of traditional lifeworlds and holds out a largely unfulfilled promise of rationality. For Anthony Giddens, the agency and settings of power cannot be conceptualized separately, nor can the emergence of modernity be understood apart from the changing reach and geographical configuration of power. For Michael Mann, a history of social power turns necessarily on an analysis of power’s networks, logistics, and spatial contours. Such ideas about power and modernity emphasize the importance of a historical geography that is both immersed in data and sensitive to general literatures. A growing conversation between historical geography and parts of social theory would enrich both, while drawing historical geography into much closer association with the rest of human geography.

Key Words: historical geography, power, modernity, social theory, discourse, lifeworld, structuralization.

Issues of power and modernity now preoccupy much of the literature in social theory and, in various ways, penetrate the social sciences, including human geography. There they contribute to an intellectual environment quite unlike that in the 1950s and 1960s when A. H. Clark in the U.S. and Clifford Darby in England established historical geography as a substantial geographical subfield. Then positivism was much in the air; arguments raged about the extent to which geography could be a law-finding science of spatial relations. Historical geography itself emerged partly in reaction to the view of geography as a spatial science. Now, human geography increasingly reflects broad, interdisciplinary interests in culture, the political implications of authorship, and elaborate post-Marxian and post-Weberian accounts of the changing dynamics of power as societies become modern. In the process, theory is being reconceptualized as broad, interrelated sets of ideas to be worked with suggestively rather than treated as candidates for laws. Geography is becoming sensitive to culture as well as space, to the past, and to the changing spatial configuration of power. Within this intellectual revolution, historical and much of the rest of human geography are converging—by backing into each other.

This essay deals with this convergence and its implications by considering the current interdisciplinary interest in power and modernity. It touches on the work of four remarkable scholars—Michel Foucault, a French historian of, he said, systems of thought; Jürgen Habermas, a German critical theorist; and two English sociologists, Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann—all of whom have written tellingly and, for geographers, exceedingly suggestively, on the changing conduct of power as societies become modern. Then I consider the relevance of some of their ideas to the practice of historical geography and to the relationship of the subfield to human geography as a whole. The essay is a foray, and a somewhat personal one at that. Yet, although the four certainly do not represent all the current literature on modernity and power, there are good reasons for dealing with them: Foucault, more than anyone, has rekindled an interest in culture, largely by thinking about power as no one quite had before him; Habermas has proceeded from an...
analysis of the act of communication to a vast, influential theory of the emerging character and predicament of modernity; Giddens is best known for his attempts to conceptualize human actions in their spatial contexts and to show how, as the modern world emerged, these contexts have changed; and Mann, whose work is at the margin of social theory but close to historical geography, has shown how an emphasis on the spatial logistics of social power can structure a historical account of social change. Foucault, Habermas and, some would say, Giddens, are at the center of the contemporary discussion of modernity. The work of all four bears on research and writing across a broad geographical spectrum. The examples I use to consider their relevance are drawn from my own work but, in the light of current interests in the authorship of texts, this may not be altogether amiss.

**Foucault and Habermas**

Foucault is interested, above all, in the relations among power, truth, and experience (Foucault 1970, 1977a, b, 1978, 1980). He has attempted to show that broad subterranean patterns of thought and the disjunctions between them—the “archaeologies of knowledge” he explored in *The Order of Things*—can be identified; that these patterns have their own “genealogies” as they move in related ways through the generations. These patterns are wrapped up not only in the way people think about their world, but in the nature of that world itself (Foucault would say in the constitution of their subjects): clinics, prisons, asylums, armies, the human body. Foucault holds that writing, any system of thought, is a creation, a fiction in the broad sense of the term, and that it is tied to “discourses” (that is, clusters of assumptions and meanings) that interact in the world with other meanings embedded in other discourses, the one perhaps dominant for a time but always changing. Basic to Foucauldian thought is the premise that truth is not detachable, not “out there” to be found; truths are, rather, effects of the way particular discourses shape the organization of knowledge and, therefore, power. Foucault offers no overarching theory of society; rather, as some have said (e.g., Smart 1985), he offers a method of inquiry that is acutely sensitive to the exercise and impact of power embedded in competing discourses in a changing world in which the possibility of freedom is circumscribed, not so much by modes of production as by systems of thought and associated discourses and disciplinary techniques.

In an age with almost boundless capacity to manipulate data and populations, the attraction of such ideas is obvious, especially when backed by Foucault’s erudition and elegant, humorous prose. If he is right, the social sciences are forced to re-examine themselves, partly because their claim to any privileged truth status would be gone and partly because they are deeply implicated in the surveillance activities of the state and, more generally, in structures of domination. In Foucault’s aftermath, the arrogance that underlay the quest for universal laws or, for that matter, the confident interpretation of other cultures, tends to be replaced by academic introspection—so much that some contemporary ethnographers have become passive reporters of cultures. To read Foucault is to be acutely sensitized to the political and cultural assumptions in writing (e.g., Clifford 1988; McGrane 1989), the power of writing to purvey them, and the ways in which systems of thought, often implicit and completely taken-for-granted, have the power to shape lives and the geographies in which they are enmeshed.

Like Foucault, Jürgen Habermas is interested in the character of modernity (Habermas 1984, 1987a, b; also White 1988; Benhabib 1986; Gregory 1989). Unlike Foucault, he thinks that modernity has made it possible, at least in principle, to “free ourselves from the naive, situation-oriented attitude of actors caught up in the communicative practice of everyday life” (1987a, 133). In the modern world, cultural traditions that once were taken for granted may be exposed to methodical analysis and testing, that is, to the possibility of rational thought. He analyzes the circumstances of rationality not, as would Foucault, in the light of protracted archival investigations and of the discourses that may be discerned therein, but around a set of very abstract concepts intended to describe the context of communication in modern societies.

Far in the background of modernity, according to Habermas, lie traditional lifeworlds, that is, taken-for-granted worlds dominated by custom and tradition, by a set order of things that gives meaning to and imposes close limits on individual lives. Within traditional lifeworlds,
people are bound to each other, to artifacts, and to nature, in a seamless web of interrelations from which it is impossible to stand apart. Such a lifeworld, in Habermas’s words, is “collectively shared,” “homogeneous,” and “omnipresent”; it is reproduced as a whole in each individual interaction. It is the “preunderstood context” of action, the background against which, unconsciously, communication takes place and action unfolds. For the individual living within it, the lifeworld is enveloping and invisible, a “context that cannot be gotten behind,” (Habermas 1987a, 133) and therefore such an individual cannot think objectively about the context and presuppositions of life. If an enveloping lifeworld provides a measure of certainty and security, it prevents people from dealing with the “dissonant experiences” associated with other lifeworlds and this because they are unable to rationalize their own.

Gradually modernity has undermined the “unquestionable givenness” of the traditional lifeworld. For moderns the lifeworld comes into view and is recognized as a particular cultural creation; it can be thematized, analyzed, and tested across its entire range. As the elements of a once taken-for-granted world are increasingly debated and analyzed, the room for individual decision-making based on rational thought expands. The individual is freed, at least in principle, from the unanalyzed and unanalyzable givens of the traditional lifeworld. This is what Habermas means by “the rationalization of the lifeworld.” The circumstances of life that once were accepted without question increasingly have been opened to argument, struggle, and contestation. In Habermas’s view, this is modernity’s great potential achievement.

But if the rationalization of the lifeworld is, potentially, the liberating achievement of modernity, Habermas holds that the rational modern mind is unable to grasp its own circumstances. Elements, at least, of the lifeworld have become visible, but are not comprehensible because the lifeworld has been so fragmented that individuals cannot begin to discern its wholeness (“the fragmentation of the lifeworld”). The analytical modern mind confronts a disjointed, fractured world of different logics and personal circumstances that, up to now, have defied unified analysis. Therefore the potential for rationality and freedom inherent in modernity is compromised—the source, Habermas maintains, of modern disquiet. Rationality itself, the potential liberating achievement of modernity, is part of the problem: as modernity breaks further and further into the traditional lifeworld, it substitutes individual, rational analysis for custom. As learning expands, it crystallizes in specialized forms of argumentation, in the process fracturing the traditional lifeworld. Society recomposes itself into groups and institutions with particular rationales, lives are “decentered,” and modernity lives with the paradox that by fracturing the lifeworld, its enabling rationality “enters into competition with the integrating principle of reaching understanding.” More than this, whole systems of action, as opposed to individual thoughts and actions, become rationalized and increasingly autonomous; “their imperatives go beyond the consciousness of those integrated into them” (Habermas 1987a, 333), and impose, in Weber’s term, impersonal “iron cages” on individual lives (Benhabib 1986, 246). Here Habermas identifies such “steering mechanisms” as money, the law, the economic institutions of late capitalism, and the governmental bureaucratic complex. They all colonize the lifeworld as communication comes to depend on systems rather than language and familiarity (the systems penetration of the lifeworld). For Habermas, Marx’s analysis of alienation with the framework of the labor theory of value seriously overgeneralized a particular instance of the subordination of the lifeworld to the imperatives of rationalized and increasingly impersonal systems (1987a, 332–73; White 1988, 108–10). At heart, the problem of modernity is not simply tied to the nature of production, or even of institutions, but is a problem of communication when the everyday certainties of the traditional lifeworld are gone. The modern lifeworld is fragmented by the habits of rationality and colonized by systems that tend to override close, personal communication and even, to a considerable degree, language.

Habermas, then, attempts to develop a theory of communicative action that is intended to serve as a “general scaffolding” by means of which modernity as a whole can be analyzed. His analysis appears to overlap with Foucault’s at a number of points, but the two proceed in different ways from radically different assumptions. Habermas finds a rational opportunity in modernity, although, if I understand him, his sense of the rational opportunity is modest. It offers people the scope to think about them-
selves and their world and to make rational choices within the constraints of particular times and places. There is no one logical agenda, no transcendental reason, no sets of universal laws in this reading of modernity, but Habermas does find in the modern condition the possibility of a relative, qualified rationality. His position is cautious and hedged. If it appears to move him towards Foucault’s world of cultural discourses, in Habermas’s mind it does not. His criticism of Foucault is basic, turning around the defense of a rational opportunity between relativism (the view that everything is relative to particular circumstances) and foundationalism (the view that reality can be reduced to first principles and universals). In this qualified rationality, Habermas finds the promise of philosophy and modernity. Foucauldian historiography, he thinks, is flawed by an involuntary presentism “that remains hermeneutically stuck in its starting position,” by relativism, and by an “arbitrary partisanship . . . that cannot account for its normative foundations” (Habermas 1987b, 276). For Foucault, of course, what passes as rationality is dependent on discourse. Modern rationality, he would say, cannot account for “normative foundations” that, inevitably, are bedded in a particular discourse.  

The difference is basic. For Foucault, to take one example, the social sciences are instruments of power; they perform much of the surveillance required by the modern state, yet mask their power by claiming general status for culturally-determined discourses that have immense capacity to interfere with individual lives. For Habermas the social sciences embody the essential paradox of modernity as the emancipatory potential of the rationalized lifeworld, which created the social sciences, undermines that world’s rational capacity. The social sciences reflect both the rational opportunity of modernity and the capacity of that rationality to fracture the lifeworld as knowledge becomes the preserve of experts and loses contact with the thoughts of ordinary people. Knowledge so reified and insulated by expertise deprives the ordinary person of the cognitive potential of modernity. “Everyday consciousness is robbed of its synthesizing power; it becomes fragmented” (White 1988, 117).

Both Foucault and Habermas have contributed powerfully to the intellectual climate. To read Foucault is to encounter a brilliant French mind preoccupied, it seems to me, with French classicism and its ramifications through the mind and body of France. He seems at war with Descartes and Voltaire and, in his remarkable analyses, with their long and surprising issue (Megill 1985, 228). If his “archaeological” studies of changing habits of mind and his explorations of changing modes of discipline, punishment, and sexuality are taken as explorations of the background and character of modernity (as they usually are outside France) then his legacy may be a few enormously telling ideas: that great power is exercised within cultural discourses; that such power is diffuse and cannot be traced to a particular source; that the discourse of modernity is constituted by a technology of power that has created a disciplinary society; that punishment, once associated with brutal public spectacles, has become pervasively regulative; and that there are few corners hidden from the regulative gaze: even sexuality has been remade. Such ideas have gained wide currency and have sensitized us to unanticipated ramifications of power (in, for example, our own writing). In his later work, Foucault became a close student of the spatial settings of power. In the mid–1970s, he gave an interview on geography; it started diffidently but ended thus:

The longer I continue, the more it seems to me that the formation of discourses and the genealogy of knowledge need to be analyzed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power. Tactics and strategies deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organizations of domains which could well make up a sort of geopolitics where my preoccupations would link up with your methods. One theme I would like to study in the next few years is that of the army as a matrix of organization and knowledge; one would need to study the history of the fortress, the “campaign,” the “movement,” the colony, the territory. Geography must indeed necessarily lie at the heart of my concerns (Foucault 1980, 77).

Most of this work lay ahead, and Foucault himself would not do it. But, as one of his friends, Gilles Deleuze, remarked, Foucault already had redrawn the map of power. For Foucault power has no fixed location, as in a sovereign, the state, or capital, but rather is dispersed through cultural discourses and their shifting and inherently unstable networks, alliances, and strategies. Power, he maintains, “is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege,’ acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions” (De-
leuze 1988, 25). Increasingly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of these strategic positions have been within rather than above the social body. Disciplinary techniques and, at an individual level, biopower have regulated and normalized labor, time, and the human body. Such power, Foucault holds, cannot be traced to a single source; it is not grounded, as almost all writers on power since Hobbes have held, in some conception of sovereign right. Rather it is decentered in competing discourses and strategies, and is best studied in the “capillaries” of power that shape individual lives and bodies. In short, Foucault would invert the map of power.\(^4\) He does not want to conduct a “discourse of truth,” but many would say that he has shifted the way we think of the world.

Habermas’s conceptualization of modernity is more comprehensive than Foucault’s, but also more abstract. His traditional lifeworld, largely based on descriptions by British social anthropologists of traditional African societies, is juxtaposed to the world of late capitalism, a vast ellipsis that ignores most European and world history. Moreover, Habermas is almost silent on questions of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. He does not consider, except in passing, the most elementary spatial differences within the modern world: for example, those between town and countryside or between first and third worlds. He is what he is: a critical theorist trying to conceptualize modernity, not a historian, not a geographer. His contribution, built around a theory of communicative action, may be a powerful philosophical complement to Marx, but it leaves almost all the details to be filled in.\(^5\) And yet, the fragmented, colonized, and rationalized lifeworlds of modernity seem all around us, not only in minds, institutions, and social pathologies, but also in the environments we inhabit. And what perhaps—much elaborated and in a somewhat different vocabulary—are the concept of lifeworld and the idea of synthesis entailed in it but Habermasian extensions of venerable geographical assumptions?

**Mann and Giddens**

The project that Foucault contemplated near the end of his life and the details of the transition from traditional to modern lifeworlds that are absent from Habermas have received general attention from two remarkable English sociologists, Michael Mann and Anthony Giddens. Giddens is the more abstract, Mann the more in command of the historical record, but because they both take the territorial arrangement of power so seriously and because they are both such committed (if qualified) generalists, they have both been able to create broad outlines of geographical change in human societies: from the neolithic in the case of Mann, and (essentially) in Europe since the Middle Ages in the case of Giddens.

Societies, for Mann, “are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power” (Mann 1986, 1). The most important networks form around ideological, economic, military, and political power sources. Their boundaries and capacities rarely exactly and their social control is never complete enough to prevent what he calls the interstitial emergence of new or extended networks. Social life is always more complex than its dominant institutions. However untidy the social reality, the “proximate methodology” of ideal types that characterizes the sociospatial and organizational aspects of power networks is conceptually suited to the social “mess.” Mann provides a broad classification of power. Power may be collective (people cooperating to increase their power over others or over nature) or distributive (affecting the allocation of fixed amounts of power among people). Its organizational reach may be extensive (the ability to organize minimally many people over large territories) or intensive (the ability to organize tightly and require a sizeable commitment). Its organizational mode may be authoritative (definite demands willed by the powerful and requiring conscious obedience) or diffused (spontaneous, unconscious, decentered). A military high command exercises authoritative power; the spread and adoption of the bow and arrow is an example of diffused power. These categories are intended to facilitate the analysis of societies as networks with particular “spatial contours.” In fact they recede as Mann’s analysis progresses, and his study is held together by his constant preoccupation with the organization and logistics of power. He stresses the spatial organization of power not only because different forms of power have different territorial expressions, but because, he would say, power cannot be understood apart from the territory in which it operates.
With this clear focus and thin conceptual arsenal, Mann turns to the long story of social power in a massive three-volume work of which only the first volume, to 1760, has so far been published. From the ranked sedentary societies of the late Neolithic, evolutionary theory is held to be wrong. Societies were intensely local; many early organizational achievements (as at Stonehenge) were evolutionary dead-ends as there was no common developmental path. Mann plunges into this tangle, in the process telling a huge story that is only just feasible because of his focus on the organization, logistics, and spatial pattern of power. This, indeed, is what distinguishes Mann’s account from other broad analyses of social change, whether built around a controlling idea (Spengler, Toynbee), eclectic learning (McNeill) or wise, historically sensitive Marxism (Anderson). Medieval Europe, to enter a late chapter of Mann’s story, was one civilization in the sense that it combined Roman tradition, Christianity, and largely Germanic practices of mixed farming, but in innumerable local variety. The church provided the most extensive and normalizing network of power, but it was superimposed across many small, weak states that quite controlled neither marcher lords nor hegemonic relations with neighboring states. Within states, there was “a multiplicity of part-autonomous, competitive local economic power networks” from peasant communities to guilds. Long-distance trade was weak, accounting for a tiny fraction of production. Over several centuries, this world gradually gave way to another dominated by a capitalist economy and a civil society increasingly managed by centrally-organized, carefully-bounded national states. No longer territorial conglomerates, each tended towards an organic whole. Military organization had much to do with this transition. The introduction of the cannon, for example, required expensive fortifications beyond the means of many lesser states. Eventually the industrial revolution would emerge, not from any particular cause other than the consolidation of ever more impersonal forces associated with increasingly abstract, diffuse, and generalized networks of power.

Giddens’s historical analysis focuses on the transition from what he calls class-divided societies associated with traditional agrarian states to class societies associated with modern nation-states. Preceding this analysis are several books (Giddens 1979, 1981, 1984) in which he attempts to provide a general conceptual framework for understanding the nature of human social activity. Central to this undertaking is his concept of structuration, an awkward word used to mean not only that social actions reflect both individual choice and social organization (in Giddens’s terms both agency and structure), but also that social structures themselves are “produced and reproduced in interaction.” “The structural properties of social systems,” Giddens claims, “are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (1984, 25). Because the interpenetration of agency and social structure is entailed in the concept of structuration, Giddens suggests that it overcomes the “dualism” in social theory between individual and society. Whether it does so is considerably debated (Held and Thompson 1989; Clark et al. 1990), and the different views may well reflect different analytical demands. My impression is that structuration theory, like so many other bodies of ideas, is plausible but not provable, and that it is suggestively but not deductively useful. Conceivably, for example, had structuration theory been in the air, geographers would neither have embraced environmental determinism nor, later, have neglected agency while reducing structure to geometry.

As Giddens has developed his thinking about structuration, so he has sought to ground social theory in time and space (Giddens 1984). In this light, he attempts to integrate social theory with particular historical and geographical contexts and to argue that the challenge of “theorizing agency, structure, and contextuality” is equally central to sociology, history, and human geography (Giddens 1984). For him the challenge of “theorizing” is to uncover a set of generalizations about the pattern of social change as societies become modern. Because his understanding of social processes is contextual, his search for pattern leads him to consider the geographical configuration of power. Social activities occur in locales, society’s power containers as Giddens conceives them, for example, household, city, or nation-state. Within such containers, the sources of power may be authoritative (the capacity to manage human beings themselves) or allocative (the capacity to manage the material goods and natural forces used in production), and the nature of power will vary in scope (penetration of different
areas of peoples' lives) and intensity (the means to secure compliance). These are simple categories that serve more easily, I find, than Mann's. Both the source and nature of power will depend in large part upon the management of time-space relations in particular locales. The potential reach of power, and therefore the potential size of the power container expands with, in Giddens's unpleasant term, increasingly time-space distanciation brought about, most commonly, by changes in technology or in the organization and communication of information.

As Giddens analyzes the emergence of modernity (1987), a social condition he considers to be radically new, his concept of structuration recedes into the general conceptual background where it belongs. His account is shaped by the simple distinctions mentioned above, which he uses to shape generalizations about the locales and logistics of power. In the class-divided societies associated with traditional states, the city, he holds, was the dominant power container; the state itself was weakly bounded, running off in the case of empire to the edge of the known world or to barbarians too remote and insignificant to pacify, or in the case of smaller feudal states, to contested border zones. Power was held from a ruler and exercised by a small elite who shared a language and ideology but whose allocative power was feeble and authoritative power only somewhat greater. The logistical problems of penetrating the countryside were enormous. Officials could tax, extract corvée labor and military recruits, and punish; the intensity of power in selected places and times and for selected purposes could be great, but such power had little scope to affect ordinary daily lives. As long as taxes were paid and labor supplied, the countryside was left alone. The problems of time-space distanciation created by poor overland transportation, sluggish communications, and the virtual absence of mechanisms of surveillance (no police, no social scientists) made it impossible to do otherwise. Consequently, town and countryside were different, if related, worlds. The official ideology spread through a network of towns and to the country estates of the elite, but the countryside was intensely local, a dense mosaic of different peasant communities that were the power containers of most ordinary lives. Such lives depended heavily on nature and custom; land, livelihood, and community were intertwined; economy and society were not detachable; and most work was unsupervised. Societies were deeply segmented; beneath the relatively common culture of a predominantly urban elite, the mass of the population—usually about 90 percent—lived in local, culturally distinct communities. In their world, a long day's walk brought different accents, lores, and human landscapes.

In Europe by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, another form of state, characterized by heightened central control and state regulation, was emerging. Bureaucracies became larger, officials more likely to be salaried. Cities slowly lost power to the state; attempts to standardize civil law, currency, or weights and measures still encountered stiff regional resistance. Standardization probably went furthest in the military: regular armies became larger, more drilled, uniformed, and far more expensive to administer and maintain. Like Mann and Foucault, Giddens holds that changes in military organization and administration, which considerably preceded structural changes in the industrializing work place, facilitated the emergence of the modern nation-state.

Class-divided societies gave way in northwestern Europe about the beginning of the nineteenth century to class societies organized around capitalist economies, industrialization, and the nation-state. As capitalism became the dominant economic system, land became private property, labor a commodity. Marx, Giddens holds, is correct here; never previously had the market so penetrated society. The factory and industrial system, efficient new forms of production, were seized upon by capital; the inner dynamic of industrialization was not a new technology but capital's drive for new products, markets, and profits. The pursuit of profit was facilitated by the increasing separation of economy and polity. While the authoritative power of the state increased, allocative power passed to capital. The state became responsible for educating and policing, for central legal and monetary systems, and for providing an ordered environment for an efficient capitalist economy. Capital abandoned violence but retained the right to fire, power enough when labor was detached from land and dependent on wages. The increasing authoritative power of the state was made possible by improvements in transportation, communication, information gathering and storage, and methods.
of surveillance, all of which pushed back time-space edges, increasing the range and scope of power. The nation-state became able to regulate and to enforce across its territory. It became precisely bounded. Within its boundaries, an increasingly common national society replaced the old, broad division of towns and countryside, and the countryside’s myriad local ways. The nation-state itself became the power container of capitalist societies. Capitalism had not created an international order but an increasingly international economy based in closely bounded national societies, each jealous of sovereignty and citizenship and protected, more or less, by armies, diplomacy, and alliances. Within nation-states, individuals came to live in the “created environments” (“commodified time-space”) of modern urbanism; work in designed, supervised work places; be counted in a world increasingly constituted by statistics; be instructed about deviance and normality; and routinized in psychologically shallow paths that provide little of the security offered by custom, moral consensus, and the familiarities of day-to-day life in the local, land-based communities of the traditional world.

Historical Geography, Power, and Modernity

It remains to consider the relationships among historical geography, human geography in general, and the ideas about power and modernity in these sketches of the work of Foucault, Habermas, Mann, and Giddens.

At the most general level, the relationship seems obvious. Social power is no longer conceived apart from its geographical context. Such power requires space, its exercise shapes space, and space shapes social power. The one cannot be conceptualized apart from the other; they exist in ongoing reciprocal interaction. This is worked out most explicitly in Giddens’s concept of structuration, but is also central to Foucault’s analysis of the dispersion of power in particular discourses and settings. Hence Mann, writing a history of social power, is preoccupied with the logistics and spatial contours of society, while Giddens evokes concepts such as “locale” and “time-space distanciation” to write about modernity. These social theorists are also involved with the past: Habermas perhaps elliptically, Foucault centrally, Mann since the Neolithic, Giddens in the process of becoming modern. Social theory, conceived in these terms, leads away from covering laws and universals and points towards contextual, culturally-sensitive studies—while, to be sure, encouraging us to think expansively about them. In Foucault’s hands, it brings authorship to the fore, emphasizes the authoredness of texts, our own included, and encourages reflection on the act of writing (or of map-making, e.g., Harley 1988). In all of these ways, they suggest an intellectual environment that, one is tempted to say, could hardly be more hospitable for human geography in general and historical geography in particular.

Beyond this, they offer a diverse, much-disputed body of ideas that can be engaged in various ways. As far as I can judge, they are least likely to be useful if fitted to formal research designs. I am not sure that such concepts as “the systems penetration of the lifeworld” or “structuration” can be formally tested. I doubt, as some have urged (e.g., Gregson 1990) that Giddens needs to, or can, specify a middle ground of explicit structure, other than historical suggestions of the type he offers in The Nation State and Violence, that would enable the concept of structuration to be operationalized. A wise insight need not be deductively useful or a model for empirical research. Rather, their work is more likely to yield ideas that lurk, more or less influentially, in the background of research (sensitizing devices, Giddens calls them), somewhat as did, for so long in the U.S., Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis or, in Canada, Harold Innis’s arguments about staples and a northern economy. How far in the background? There is no one answer. Some of Foucault’s ideas have become remarkably pervasive, affecting much of late twentieth-century scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Habermas’s huge “scaffolding” may or may not survive as a hugely influential body of ideas in the order of Marx’s or Weber’s. It is early to judge. Giddens or Mann’s generalizations about social change in Europe over the last several centuries may well interest North Americans (who will find them suggestive of North America’s deviation from Europe) at least as much as Europeans (who, working on particular topics, may find them too general). The very starkness of the analysis may particularly fit the starkness of the European encounter with North American space.
To be more specific, much North American historical geography has been taken up with studies of pioneer settlement. In the background of all such studies is the pervasive question of the nature and extent of European social change in non-European settings overseas. To this question there have been at least three stock answers: (1) that European society was remade on the frontier largely because of the sudden availability of free or cheap land (Turner); (2) that European society was remade overseas because fragments of the European social whole detached themselves from Europe and, overseas, turned the mentality of a fragment into that of an entire society (Hartz); and (3) that European life was essentially reproduced in the New World and, because it was, European analyses of social power are equally relevant to both sides of the Atlantic (many authors). But if Giddens and Foucault are right that the societies and the localities they occupy are interdependent, then it follows that social change was the inevitable consequence of a displacement of people across an ocean to take up life where most of the spatial details of living had been rearranged. In Giddens's analysis, the whole revised geographical circumstances of life—the size of farms, the proximity of forest, the low density of population, the poor quality of pioneer roads, the distance from towns, the circuit-riding preacher for want of a local church and resident minister, and so on—rather than the availability of cheap land, would be catalysts of change. Put in his language, pioneering would have changed the time-space edges of European life, and because such structure bears on human agency in an ongoing, reciprocal relationship (structuration) social change would ensue. The point is basic. Historical geographers interested in European settlement overseas have been closer, in this reading, to the center of the interpretive issues than perhaps they have quite realized.

To be yet more specific, Southern Ontario, with approximately a million people in 1850, was neither what Giddens would call a class-divided society associated with traditional agrarian states nor a class society associated with modern nation-states. Its dispersed, low-density, farm-based population and its low level of urbanization (3 percent of the regional population in Toronto, the largest city) marked it off, as Giddens or Mann would immediately appreciate, from any European society. To study it with their work in mind would lead not only to the consideration of the spatial organization of power but also to some fairly clear lines of attack. After Giddens, one would be interested in the "power containers," the towns first of all—the extent to which they performed the functions of European towns, why the levels of urbanization were so low, in what ways urban-centered power reached into the countryside, and how this compared with the early nineteenth-century outreach of European towns. At the other end of the spectrum, the degree of autonomy of the local, rural community would require close attention. One would be exceedingly sensitive to all changes in transportation, communications, or organization that bore on the reach of power. Probably one would want to explore the relationship between the lack of deference that troubled English gentlewomen in the Ontario backwoods and the particular problems associated with the scope and penetrance of power in such settings. One would probably analyze the virtual absence of factory-based manufacturing in Ontario before 1850 less in terms of the scarcity of capital or of British policy in relation to, as Giddens would say, the particular problems of time-space distanciation associated with a dispersed population served by rudimentary roads. After Mann, one would be more inclined to work out the principal networks of power that operated in Ontarian space, trying to sort out in as much detail as possible how the commercial system(s) worked, how state power played itself out across Ontario, how the churches organized themselves, and at what points and to what extent these different networks of power converged. Either way, one would try to untangle the spatial lineaments of power, assuming that in so doing the general nature of early Ontario's society would be a good deal clearer. Such approaches are not sufficient nor even in some particulars very original. They are not substitutes for mastery of a regional literature and familiarity with regional archives. But they are signposts; they would have helped me some twenty years ago when, in a book on Canada, I tried to make some provisional sense of early Ontario (Harris and Warkentin 1974).

In British Columbia, to take another example, traditional lifeworlds, much as Habermas described them, survived well into the nineteenth century. Natives knew local environment intimately, and lived their lives with familiar people
who dealt with the same spirits, knew many of the same stories, and, over the years, shared dreams and visions. Theirs was a familiar spirit world enmeshed in a social world, enmeshed in the environment. No conceptual lines separated people from nature, the animate from the inanimate, the living from the dead. People became animals, animals people, and the dead reappeared in various forms. A warm rain might be a dead mother, weeping. As Habermas would say, such a lifeworld was enveloping, impossible to stand apart from, impossible to analyze from within.10 As Europeans began to penetrate this lifeworld, natives could only subsume them within it. Simon Fraser, the first European to negotiate the Fraser River to its mouth, was thought to be coyote, the old transformer who made the world as it is, and his French-Canadian crew were sun, moon, morning star, arrow-armed person, diver, and others from the mythological age. Missionary accounts of salvation became stories of a new trail to the land of shades and dancing ghosts. 

As time went on, and particularly as the modern nation-state settled around British Columbia, new ways could not be subsumed within the assumptions and values of traditional lifeworlds. Laws about private property, backed by police officers, courts, and gaols, were new and threatening. So were residential schools, taught in English, that Indian Agents forced native children to attend. So were reserves, parsimoniously allocated with little attention to the seasonal mobility of former native life. Such “steering mechanisms” consolidated an alien system of power. The fragmented native lifeworlds that ensued are starkly manifest in the map of native reserves which, at a provincial scale, are the insignificant cadastral corollary of the opening of most of the resources of British Columbia to others. The argument, frequently put, that control of native lifeworlds survived in British Columbia until natives lost their lands, is supported by the theoretical contention that a society and its setting cannot be conceptualized separately.

What power detached natives from their lands? Gunboats that shelled coastal villages? Police? Indian Agents? A provincial legislature? A federal Indian Act? Yes, all of these. But Foucault would say that underlying such manifestations of power were cultural assumptions more pervasive and powerful than any number of police or Indian Agents—that, indeed, created the need for police and Indian Agents. Some, in British Columbia, were about the rights of private property and the responsibility of government to protect them, and were not so much European (with lurking notions of social perfection) as British (a pragmatic understanding that private property was the most efficient allocation of resources). A predominantly British settler society took them as given. Others were about Indians; either they would disappear or be remade into Europeans. Virtually everyone assumed so: the government officials who allocated reserves (hence the small reserves), the settlers who acquired former native land, the ethnographers who engaged in savage anthropology (recording vanishing ways while ignoring late-nineteenth-century realities), the missionaries who worked to turn natives into one or other European vision of Christian perfection. Reserves, the Indian Act, the Indian residential schools all were bent to the same end: if natives did not die out, they would be assimilated. In Oblate residential schools (the Oblates were a French order formed to aid the poor, encourage medieval piety, and fend off the materialism of industrial society), native children were constantly watched. They were never alone. The sexes were segregated, children were not allowed to see their own naked bodies, much less another child’s, and the use of a native language was considered rebellious. Punishment was severe. Foucault would have understood full well what was going on—something not very different from the disciplinary system at Mettray, a boys’ reform school near Tours, which he studied intensively (Foucault 1977b; Driver 1990). From the native perspective, the constant assumption, encountered at every turn outside native society, that they would become something else, was deadly. This is what Foucault means by the diffuse (or decentered) nature of power.

And I, who write on these matters while native issues simmer in British Columbia? Am I, in a sense, living off the avails, somewhat like the archaeologist Harlan Smith who came in the 1890s to study the Thompson Indians and shipped to New York every important artifact he could find? Are my texts, like those of ethnographers who assumed natives were becoming Europeans, making it harder for people to be what they are or want to be? If they might be, then have I the right to write? Foucault encourages such thoughts, taking them well
beyond the old assumptions of cultural relativity, and in the process fostering, one would hope, a more self-critical, humble social science.

In sum, both Habermas and Foucault seem to me to have a great deal to say to a geographer who would make some sense of nineteenth-century British Columbia. The vast ellipsis at the heart of Habermas’s analysis of the lifeworld makes empirical sense in British Columbia where traditional lifeworlds, apparently much as Habermas described them, and modernity met face to face. British Columbia, and other new corners of the New World are, perhaps, quintessential Habermasian landscapes. Certainly, his ideas about the colonization of the lifeworld warrant careful consideration here; quite possibly he has put his finger both on the sequence of change in native societies and on the heart of the native predicament in the face of modernity. To read Habermas while working on the contact process in British Columbia is, simply, to be exposed to a coherent array of powerful, exceedingly suggestive ideas. Foucault lurks even more pervasively in the air. He has me thinking about the nature of power as settler and Native societies collided, about disciplinary strategies in particular British Columbian settings, about the political and cultural overtones in the act of writing, about my own political engagement, as individual and academic, with my subject. Having read Foucault, I will not be able to write on British Columbia as if I had not read him.

Where, then, is historical geography in the very different intellectual environment in which it now lives? Encouraged in many ways, I should think, for the intellectual drift of our time has the potential to move historical geography into more prominence than ever before. But if historical geographers are to seize this opportunity, they can hardly be complacent. There are literatures to know better than most of us have and an intellectual conversation to engage more fully than most of us have been inclined to do. In this respect, I tend to agree with Harvey (1990) and Kay (1990). The challenge, it seems to me, is to retain our respect for the archives and our steeping in the complexities of particular places (Harris 1978; Meining 1989) while enlarging our ability to situate these studies in broader contexts of ideas. For some of us, this will mean knowing parts of the literature in social theory considerably better than we do.

The task is substantial, but not nearly as intimidating as it seems. As historical geographers forge closer contacts with such literatures, they will find that their interdisciplinary contacts expand, and that they are in much better touch with other human geographers who, exposed to some of the same writing, will be venturing, more and more, into the past. A reintegrated human geography, in which many subdisciplinary specializations recede, may well emerge. Surely this would be all to the good as long as human geography retains a substantial interest in the past (as now seems likely) and avoids the short-term temptations and long-term intellectual disasters associated with a narrowly applied focus on the present. The discipline is in some flux, as it should be in intellectually changing times, and none of us has a crystal ball. Yet it seems to me that a historical geography involved with the archives and also with some of the ideas of our time has to be close, in one way or another, to the heart of a reconstructed human geography.

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Notes

1. The crucial papers were perhaps Darby (1953) and Clark (1954), but the influence of the two lay more in their academic networks that enabled them to place students in many important departments.
2. This is not the place to explore the much-considered relationship between Foucault’s “archaeologies” and “genealogies.” On some of the issues, see Rajchman (1985).
3. But, as often with Foucault, the matter is not so clear. Luc Ferry and Allain Renault (1990) attempt to clear up some of the ambiguity by pointing out that two quite different strands are mixed in Foucault’s thought, the one a “critique of reason in the name of unreason,” and the other “a critique of bourgeois rationality.” Both, Habermas would say, reveal the rational cast of the modern mind. “How can Foucault’s self-understanding as a thinker in the tradition of the Enlightenment be compatible with his unmistakable critique of precisely this form of knowledge, which is that of modernity” (Habermas 1989a, 176).
4. Surely this is only partly right. Foucault was no Marxist, but he thought of Marx as a “founder
of discursivity” and readily acknowledged that, in this broad sense, he participated in a Marxian discourse. His analysis of the decenteredness of power should perhaps be seen less as an alternative than as a complement to Marx. Foucault, for example, wrote: “The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of Capital, the joining of the growth of human grounds to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application. The investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time indispensable” (1978, 141). Frank Lentricchia (1988), ch. 1, analyzes Foucault in relation to Marx.

5. Habermas holds that modern social conflicts tend to “concern the grammar of forms of life” rather than distribution, and his work is considerably used to theorize social conflict. See, for example, Marston (1990) who draws on Habermas (1989b).

6. Harvey (1989, 102) argues that Giddens’s strict division between authoritative and allocative power is quite misleading but see Gregory (1990).

7. An idea that gains ever wider currency in geography in work by Cosgrove, Dodgshon, Gregory, Harvey, Pred, Soja, and many others; and that has almost been implicit—but without theoretical elaboration and, therefore, rather differently—in much geographical writing for a long time.

8. Of all geographers, Allan Pred has worked hardest to ground structuration theory empirically. Much of his work over the last decade combines Giddens’s ideas about structuration with Torsten Hägerstrand’s time-space geography. See Pred (1990) for an important anthology of this work. But Pred seeks neither to prove structuration theory nor to use it deductively; rather he treats structuration theory as a collection of ideas to be drawn upon.

9. Pred (1990) is also revealing in this regard. Between the empirical complexities of the archives and the abstractions of social theory lie, as he well knows, regional or topical literatures. A study of working class housing that relied on the archives and social theory without consulting the relevant literatures on labor, gender, ethnicity, and class, would not be promising.

10. At least one anthropologist (Riddington 1990) has come to the same conclusion through ethnographic studies of the Beaver people, hunter-gatherers in northeastern British Columbia.

References


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