PERMEABILITY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN GEOGRAPHY

Giuseppe CAMPIONE
University of Messina, Italy

Geography is such a complex matter. Think of it as an immersion in the age of knowledge with all the risks that this entails. Defining stratagems may seem to be mere simplifications. But, as Luhmann reminds us, reducing its complexity can be dangerous and, there is no doubt, an involutional, reactionary option.

The starting point is the state of crisis the subject underwent when it inevitably lost its paradigms during the 20th century or, in the least pessimistic hypothesis, turned them into weak or too sectional thoughts, as a consequence of excessive specialization; on the other hand, one important fact is that it was this very crisis that opened a perspective of contamination for the subject toward other disciplines, towards, for instance, critical theories in the mid-1960s, or post-modern theories – promoting permeability and a multidisciplinary approach. We had to acquire a point of reference from structured and more technically equipped sciences, which are more focused on identifying working models than phenomenological descriptions, on structural investigations rather than critical answers to problems posed by complex societies, during the course of their territorial evolution.

Fortunately, there is no starting point summed up in the search for a global theory, a “universal” theory, capable of accounting for every single event at a well-constructed level about what we still continue to call society, ethnicity, nation, state, the changing of scenarios. Since the crisis of opposing ontological-subjectivist and critical-analytical paradigms occurred, these factors actually do not hold true in general.

- Therefore, it is a question of “crossing the threshold” of the history of thought that, from ancient Greek times, has quite often changed its own paradigm. From the hypothesis of ‘the whole’ vs. ‘the single parts’, in the description of settlements and social and human groupings, to medieval hierarchical theories, to the concept of form which developed in the 17th century, to the discovery of the difference between system and environment, theory can, in fact, be traced back to a series of fundamental principles which have, however, left aside the most obvious, complicated point, that of the unpredictability of systems. This is the reason why such an important question, which we must address, shows some post-structural connotations.

- Therefore, the obscure, unknown element of liaisons could be explained in terms of elements, which, similarly to the philosophers of communicative action (Habermas, above all), tend to render the concept of system ontological and subjective. Can the definition of system lead us to a self-referential entity; a non-dialectic hypothesis based on the difference between system and environment? Shall we be able to “shift from the theory focused on the system/environment dualism to the theory of self-referential systems”? The horizon of the development of the theory is neither in the system nor in the environment per se, but in the consideration of the whole picture, with all its different elements. The basis of any system, therefore, is not the “thing in itself”, the entity or the subject (there can be no systems without environment), but rather their relationship, which reproduces itself into subsystems with their relative environments, in an unceasing self-producing activity. The upheaval of traditional categories is the result of the linguistic-functional approach, which should be considered as the turning point in any review of the complexity of a society and of multi-differentiated systems. Complexity is, in fact, the other basic factor of a non-ontological theory, which can be conceived starting from the different character of every operation in the systems, being, as it is, “information which is necessary for the system to understand and fully describe its own environment”. It is worth observing that self-poiesis, and systemic operations in general, presuppose a de-subjectivization, and that all of this occurs within differential relations: dynamic elements, societies, their boundaries and the self-reference at the basis of every system. Unlike structures, systems have their own self-generated boundaries, and are independent of the observations of others. In addition, they are subject to a multiple structure and permeability, that is, the web of intra and extra-system relations, which characterize their
relationship with relative environments, just as it is for individuals in social relations (the so-called inter-penetration).

Amongst the fundamentals of a theory, which puts self-production at the top of the list, the relationship with time plays an essential role; it distinguishes Luhmann’s theory from previous acquisitions. If we hope to formulate a universal theory, then the dynamism of systems must be acknowledged, as it is only through the concepts of reversibility and irreversibility – choosing the latter hypothesis – that not only temporal change, but also the entire developmental perspective, which does not seem to have a functionalistic analysis, can be understood. Time determines the relationship between complexity and selection, the latter being the parameter through which the system communicates, and turns communication into action. But time must be taken into account, first and foremost because there can never be any mutuality between system and environment (rather it is the non-mutuality which creates both the system and the environment); therefore, also time must be considered as differential.

Time can be “managed” by systems, in accordance with some productive metaphors (speed, prudence) which can be useful in temporalizing complexity. This ongoing task distinguishes systems as structures, which can be reversed by processes, which are irreversible. In this context, besides, it is clear why functional analysis (such as analysis of problems) is the most appropriate for revealing the systemic dynamics; functional methodology puts the evolutorial perspective (characterized by discontinuity, more than by causal connections) into structuralist statics and in this way the entire self-poietic approach to the system maintains the holistic characteristic of the previous systemic theories, “combining it though with the capacity to carry out a high level specification of problems …”. In their constituent difference, these new systems have co-evolution in common with previous ones, which is the key, meaningful factor of all. Meaning is “the common product of evolution”, and is quality which differentiates the social element from other (mechanic) systems and structures.

Meaning is the element which leads to a reduction in complexity and above all self-reference, which allows closure of systems (it is essential to note that Luhmann showed how self-poietic closure corresponds to a wide “external” opening and that, if anything, only closed, complex, and self-referential systems can “open up”.) Indeed, it is only by understanding the environment and the world, in its three material, temporal and social dimensions, that it is possible to think about the autonomy of the social dimension, starting from the internal/external metaphors (material), reversibility/irreversibility (temporal), self/other (social). Another element of de-subjectivization is in the identification of a schematism and a process of recombination at the basis of social processes, rather than of laws of nature; like symbolic generalizations and not signs at the basis of the process of self-construction of meaning. It is worth dwelling on this turning point, if, on the one hand, the tendencies to conceive societies and political systems as entities, in a substantialistic perspective (whether they be post-Weberian, subjectivistic or communicative reaction theories) are in conflict with the analytic, objectivistic, reductionist tendencies, which refuse the social theory in terms of structure and function.

Maybe what should be saved is the diversity, rather than the historic content conferred by every era, since no era can perpetuate itself.

Levi-Strauss would suggest that we “listen to the grain grow”, encourage potentialities again, re-awaken the instinct to live together engrained within history.

As Raffestin says, by replacing “a concrete object… with an intangible object, which is nothing but the set of relationships which men have in the world scene, consigned to the force of culture, carried by men”: the time of sufferance, the exodus, in all its sorrow?

And what about Utopia?

But then Utopia, writes Dematteis, is not always no place: it is also a portrayal of a desired, yearned for, possible world. It is not a-topia!

We go in search, not of “geography of the non-existent” but rather of “anti-geography of the existent”.

There is a paradigm, widespread above all in America, which defines planning as that which a planner carries out. However, recently, and in an ever more determined way, scholars
in territorial science prefer to state that planning is that which the planner “should carry out”, and they are now re-considering the nature, the characteristics and scope of these ‘duties’.

Obviously, this paradigm might also be applied to geography. Geography and geographies are here considered, from our école du regard, to objectivistic epistemology, from the geography of problems, to the geography of man, to cultural geography, from the metaphor of the earth, to world signs, from the geography of networks, to territorial positions, from present geography to critical reflection.

It is geography from the past generation, to others, to present ones, in the many ways of presenting itself in a connection-rich system.

With Olsson we can say that “with the importance traditionally attributed to space, measurements and visual countryside, geography has given itself up to external, superficial delineation. Given that the external is part of things and not of relationships, we have turned out studies on reification in which a man, woman or child is inevitably dealt with as an object and not as actual, sentient human beings, in continual evolution. This is why there is such desperate need for a more humanistic perspective, not only in geography but in social sciences in general”.

Is it possible to carry on with only wonderful defining procedures or elaborate descriptions of descriptions?

The ethics of geographic knowledge is the culture of life, freedom and peace.

It is above all the culture of cause and effect, which can be understood from the persistent asymmetry of suffering and tragedies, always different and always the same, with imperialisms which speak with mouths “full of sun and stones”, with new wars which are also asymmetric, with ethnic cleansing, genocide, famine, disease, mutilations, death, dehumanisation; with a fear that eats into the very soul. A geography based on experience, therefore; and on the sorrow of man, too.

If the tears of a child can bring up the question again of the omnipotence of God, if, after Auschwitz, we can even declare the end of this omnipotence, how is it possible to think that this suffering has not changed the Earth … we talk about the Earth, we live the distances.

If culture is not society, Vittorini asked in the first issue of Il Politecnico, it is because “it has preached, taught, discovered new continents and built machines, but it has never identified itself with society”, therefore it is as if it has never done anything for man.

It has only tried to console him.

In a world which is losing all its points of reference we can therefore call on geography and the lessons it has taught us to try to understand more about the where, the how, and the wherefore and how-fore.

It is an awkward geography which can be subversive, for instance, if it talks about the drama of immigrants who tint the Mediterranean blood, or those who are turned away and ghettoized for the peace of mind and laziness of dull-minded people to the point of racism, awkward also if it examines the new logic of colonization, genocides, repressions, wars of liberation or aggression, long struggles for independence, emancipation of groups and classes, popular revolts against subjection, the mafia and its complicities, its consubstantiality with politics, in the hard cement of ancient and new social blocks.

Sicily and its heart, and our poor dead heroes, killed by an evermore structured mafia, to “make the lot of our land kinder”.

This is a geography which understands the slow unwinding of relationships of men with men, of men with nature, the why and wherefore of places and events, the bitterness of life and the beauty of fate, as was written in an epigraph in the second century BC, now kept in the museum in Lipari.

Quoting Spinoza, keeping in mind that man is a god for man, and that man is the future of man.

We talk about micro, built-up regions, which, “in their overall setting, are catalyzed in places of high dynamism” and which, although capable of belonging to networks within their region, do not flatten out on new configurations, out of their special context”.

461
That belonging to the network, living the distances, enriches the meaning of local identities, because of their way of elaborating the intertwinements between the multiple spheres of relationships in which they are immersed, and the resulting space, and these intertwinements are a new form of space which is not without its own places: “it redefines the distance but does not cancel geography” (Castells).

As we have written elsewhere, many images are concealed around other images, and it is as if a field of analogies, symmetries and counter-positions were being formed. Writings will then try to find the equivalent of a visual image, in a potentially coherent development, potentially because in reality there is a multiplicity of possibilities which are connected between feelings and thoughts, since the sum of information, experience and value is only potentially similar in a world which is presented as a block, without a beginning or end.

Therefore which shall we opt for, the vastness of the world or the representation of the details of a single story? In any case the beginning of this portrayal should be a sort of detachment from the manifold possibilities. The landscape of memory ends up by seeming far off, an alternative to the visions and sensations of the present. It is by living these distances that maybe it will be possible to grasp the importance of the mobility of forms which accompanies the different mental path which in turn takes on the object’s materialness, transforming it. It may be therefore an attempt to mine the historic, natural forms in the search for the original form, which cannot be anything but a full objectivization of the subject: an approach to the very heart of things.

What about a life which has been lost, the life which we have never lived? Writings, books, places where experience of the world, histories, objects and people reveal themselves to the past and come into our present. A landscape-memory which scans events with all the irrevocability of judgement, which inevitably places each one in its own history.