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PaulCloke and RonJohnston

Categorizing Identity

To survive in the world we simplify it. This strategy is adopted by both individuals and collectives – although the distinction between the two is blurred because one cannot exist without the other, and so even the first sentence of this introductory chapter involves binary thinking! Our simplifications do not have to be binary, of course: binary divisions are a particular case of the wider activity of classification and categorization. But using too many categories denies the goal of simplification: psychologists argue that the average person can control her or his thinking along seven dimensions – hence the classic paper on 'the magic number seven, plus or minus two' (Miller 1956) – but most people, most of the time, use a coarser-grained structure to aid their thinking and decision-making.

Categorization – whether binary or not – is more than an aid to coping with complexity, however; it is also a means for creating our identities, again both individual and collective. Part of the determination of our essence – of our being in the world – involves defining ourselves: it is often assumed that 'we are what we are because of who we are', which involves us identifying with some type or category and, as a consequence, denying that we belong to other categories. This process of self-identification is continuous throughout our lives although it will be more intense at some times than others – when we are coming to terms with new contexts, for example, such as moving away from home for the first time, perhaps to university. As we encounter new stimuli and situations we have to place ourselves relative to them – to decide who we are; whom we identify with.

These processes of self-identification involve us joining groups and/or categories – not in the sense of applying to be a member and paying an entrance fee (although this may be the case). Many of the categories are vague and undetermined: we may identify with 'the working class' for example, a category that only exists as an abstraction – although social scientists have spent decades trying to define it precisely (and failing, because in the end it is just that – a vague abstraction – though one with a great meaning for many people). Others are presented to us by people who encourage us to join their categories, however: political parties, for example, claim to represent particular class fractions within society, and invite those who identify with a particular class to vote for them – if not to join them and work for their goals.

Almost all of the categories that we use are 'social constructions' – they are created, not given. A few – such as the distinction between human and non-human, or between animate and inanimate, or between land and water – may be considered natural in the sense of being pre-given, or existing outside any imposed categorization involving human thought, although even these pre-given distinctions have become the subject of considerable debate. The great majority of categories are not, however, pre-given; we live in worlds of human-created categories, which we modify when new situations arise that call for new responses.

Categorizations – into binaries or more complex structures – are not just 'normal' within society, therefore: they are necessary for it. Without such simplifications, societies could not exist: they could not operate without placing people and things into categories. (Think of who qualifies for free school meals, or a subsidized university education!) As such, the study of categories and of binary thinking is central to any intellectual activity, across all disciplines: we need to know about the categories being deployed in order to appreciate the society we are studying, and we need to deploy our own categories in order to undertake that study.

Geographical Binaries

For geographers, this process of categorization (binary or otherwise) is of particular interest because basic themes within our particular subject matter – environment, space and place – are frequently used in creating

collective and personal identities. Many of us identify with places (some very intensely), at a variety of scales – from our home, through our street and neighbourhood, town and region, up to a nation-state. In part, we are who we are because of what places we choose to associate with (which in most cases are places we have lived, worked or played in, even if we no longer do so). And we may express that identity in a variety of ways – as with supporting sports teams linked to those places, or political parties which represent their residents. Binary positions are then often taken up – us versus them, or 'we here' against 'them there'.

Although much of this place-identification is informal, one aspect of it is not only very formal but is also to a large extent imposed upon us – and is inherently geographical. The great majority of people in the world are citizens of one of its nation-states. (Some are citizens of more than one, but they form a very small minority of the total.) To a large extent this is an aspect of our identity over which we have little control: most of us are citizens of a state because either we were born within its territory or, wherever we were born, our parents are citizens of that state and associate us with it as well. We can apply to move to another state and become one of its citizens – but that is a privilege that may be denied to us, and not a right.

This association with a state is not only central to most people's identities, it is also geographical. One of the defining characteristics of a state in the modern world-system is that it is associated with a defined – and in almost all cases demarcated – piece of territory (possession of which may be disputed by other states). As social science theorists have argued, a system of states is necessary to the successful management of contemporary modes of production (including global capitalism): without them, collective action would be impossible and anarchy would prevail. Furthermore, in order to be effective, states must have a monopoly of certain types of power: in effect, they must be able to control their citizenry in order to operate, though it is rare for such control to be effected by a state apparatus for very long without some element of popular consent. For this reason, part of the operation of the state apparatus involves encouraging people to identify positively with their state – to feel part of it, to participate in its activities and to give it a central place in their processes of self-definition.

Membership of a state is therefore part of our identity; states are necessarily territorially defined, and processes of creating one's self involve identifying with our state's territory. Part of our very nature in contemporary society thus involves geography – in particular the ever-changing geography of territorial containers within which the management of that society is undertaken. By identifying with 'our' state, we are not only accepting the power of its state apparatus over our lives but also accepting – and indicating – that we do not identify with any other state. Geographically binary thinking, therefore, underpins a core feature of our human nature.

But that binary thinking – of 'us' versus 'them' – is rarely symmetrical: usually it involves 'us' considering we are superior to 'them', and in many cases and situations being encouraged (by the state apparatus, for example) to take such a view. Difference thus becomes more than something to be exalted: it is a potential basis for conflict – as world history has demonstrated to us so many times. Much geopolitical thinking involves promoting positive images of 'us' and negative ones of 'them': think of the theory of the 'white man's burden' which underpinned much European colonization of the rest of the world, or Reagan's portrayal of the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire', or the beliefs that underpin territorial conflicts in Palestine-Israel and many other parts of the contemporary world. Identity and difference, built on geographical foundations, thus become the bases for power relationships, foment inter-group tension and, potentially, conflict.

'Them' and 'us' is, of course, an over-simplification, and our views of the world are usually more nuanced: we recognize more than two categories and behave towards each accordingly. This sometimes involves allowing for 'special cases' – as in statements such as 'some of my best friends are x' which allow people to avoid being in difficult circumstances when negative images of x are being broadcast. But when simplicity is called for, and decisions have to be made, too often we slip into binary mode: all the world is either with us or against us!

Binary Geographies

Just as geography forms the foundation of our identity, so our association with the discipline of geography adds to our processes of self-identification. One of the key areas in which categorization is necessary in

dealing with the complexity of the world is in its study. Knowledge and its means of acquisition are divided up into another set of containers – academic disciplines. These are clearly not 'pre-givens': they are socially created divisions which we find necessary and useful. Some might seem almost pre-given because of their subject matter, such as mathematics – what we might term forms of knowledge; most are not, however – they form fields of knowledge which are the equivalent of tribal territories, covering areas of study that for some reason (usually lost in the past) have seemed sensible to put together into a separate discipline.

Those who identify with a discipline – either temporarily (as a student) or permanently (by becoming a professional and making one's career in the discipline) – then often engage in binary thinking. This may not involve 'them' and 'us' representations – though often it does: people have 'hierarchies' of disciplines in terms of their assumed status, and these are often used in power-broking. Certainly among the professionals, their tribal territory has to be defended (which to a considerable extent means that their jobs have to be!). They want resources for their university departments, students to choose to take their courses, scholars from other disciplines not to 'invade' their intellectual niches, and so on. In academic life, just as everywhere else, we simplify by creating categories – and then people identifying with those categories come into conflict.

That happens within disciplines, too. Geography is the umbrella term usually deployed for the discipline we (the authors) work in and which you (the readers) study. But geography itself has its subdivisions – many of them binary: physical and human, for example; or qualitative and quantitative; or economic and cultural; or … And people in those subdivisions compete too – for status and resources within the discipline, for adherents. Part of their case for support involves portraying the value of their work which, in a zero-sum game of finite resources, means that implicitly (if not explicitly – and very often it is, as any study of changes within geography over the past 60 years will show) what 'they' do has to be portrayed as inferior to what 'we' are engaged in. And yet, as we all really know, such categorizations – whether binary or slightly more nuanced – are really over-simplifications, and if the categories were brought together the cross-fertilization would bring massive benefits.

What we have identified is very much a paradox, therefore: thinking in categories – of which binary thinking is the most extreme case – is necessary to simplify the world in order to begin understanding it. But using those categories can then not only impede that search for understanding – by acting as blinkers – it can also lead to unproductive tensions between those who adhere to one of the positions and are thus opposed to the other(s). Sadly, the working-out of this paradox is rarely either easy or conflict-free: too often once territories are demarcated then people associated with them feel the need to defend them – if not attack others. Breaking down binaries is continually necessary, therefore, and this book is intended as a contribution to that continuing process.

A Binary World?

The history of human geography has been waymarked both by binary thinking and by exhortations to bridge between the philosophical and material polarities emerging from such thinking. Resultant landscapes of understanding have thereby exhibited a curiously double-edged character. Analysis and interpretation of human geographical phenomena have tended to fall easily into categories of seemingly distinctive opposition – urban/rural, economic/ cultural, spatial/social, quantitative/qualitative and the like – and the professional paraphernalia of human geography, such as journals, books, courses and research specialisms and reputations, have served to render these categories more concrete. Yet alongside these categorical processes and practices there has been a naggingly consistent desire by some geographers at least to argue against the domination of polarized categories and to sponsor explorations of middle ground between them: to deconstruct the binaries and create new hybrid syntheses containing the best elements of both.

Nowhere is this double edge more clearly demonstrated than in the overarching relationship between human and physical geography, within the context of which most human geographers ply their trade. Through the second half of the twentieth century, and now beyond, the 'human' and 'physical' sections of geography have been increasingly wedged apart by the forces of differential philosophy, methodology and mindset – to a considerable extent reflecting very different (and sensible) conceptions of the nature of science. As scientific practices and reputations grow ever more specialized technically, and as the human and physical 'sides' of geography reach out in very different interdisciplinary directions thus exacerbating a social science/arts-

science divide, so the forces of binary categorization have tended to desert the potential middle ground in favour of the excitement of exploration at the binary edges.

It is worth noting here that these tendencies are by no means recent. For as long as it has been argued that geography's distinctive role is in bridging the gap between physical and human phenomena, the dangers of binary tendencies have been warned against. Thus, Wooldridge and East writing in the United Kingdom in 1951 argued:

There is a degree of a false dichotomy here – a division of the subject into ‘physical geography’ and ‘human geography’. Such cleavage is the very thing geography exists to bridge, and it is false to its central aim wherever, and for whatever reasons it recognises two ‘sides’ in the subject. (p. 28)

This position was not replicated on the other side of the Atlantic, however, where it was argued that although the physical landscape was an important constraint to and opportunity for human action, appreciation of the formation of that landscape and the nature of its contemporary physical processes – how rivers erode their banks, for example – was not necessary in order to understand how people responded to their environments in the creation of ‘humanized landscapes’: in other words, it is not necessary to know how a stage is built in order to act on it (see James and Jones 1954). It is interesting to note, for example, that a special issue of the Annals to celebrate the Association of American Geographers' 75th anniversary – published in 1979 – contained no papers on physical geography, a fact responded to by the then President of the AAG, who was a physical geographer (Marcus 1979).

Indeed, this lack of interest in how the stage was built extended to some human geographers in North America at that time. Hartshorne's (1939) classic portrayal of The Nature of Geography – based very largely on German writings – not only took the position on physical geography just outlined but also argued that the study of historical geography was unnecessary except insofar as it threw light on the present. In this, he was very much at odds with geographers of the ‘Berkeley School’, led by Carl Sauer, whose own classic The Morphology of Landscape (Sauer 1925) took a very different view – one shared by historical geographers in the UK. Hartshorne was at least partly converted by some of his colleagues in the 1950s, and his later Perspective on the Nature of Geography (Hartshorne 1959) reflected this change of stance.

This brief excursion into the history of geography as an academic discipline during the twentieth century illustrates one of our earlier contentions – most binaries are human constructions and are not naturally ‘pre-given’. Indeed, it goes further, because it shows that binary constructions vary over both space and time: what was accepted as a sensible division of academic activity in one place was not replicated elsewhere – and what was considered sensible there at one date had been altered 20 years later! Our binary worlds are in constant flux.

The relative balance between the power of binary classification and the purchase of bridge-building between those binaries will often depend on the ways in which attempts to reach out from the philosophical and methodological positionings of one binary serve to colonize the other and enforce ways of knowing and understanding which are incompatible with those that characterize the other. In the case of human and physical geography, for example, attempts at integration have succeeded and failed according to the compatibilities that can be achieved across the supposed divide. For Wooldridge and East, for example, physical geography was the stage on which human geography's performance is played out:

The serious study of the subject cannot begin without the findings of physical geography; the play cannot proceed without a stage and it is a stage, be it noted, which plays a much larger part in the action than in theatrical performances. (1951: 29)

However, this endlessly possible and often subtle interconnection of stage and players has over the years become narrowed down to a series of more specific practices and ways of understanding. The subject matter of physical geography has increasingly been expressed as a series of interacting systems in which materials and processes in, say, atmosphere, geosphere, hydrosphere and ecosphere interact directly with those in others (Wolman 1992). From this perspective, interest in the ‘human’ has accordingly focused on, first, how individuals and societies cope with particular expressions of these interacting systems, highlighting ideas

such as risk and sustainability, but encasing them in the language of environmental modelling (see Thornes 2003) and, secondly, how they stimulate, exacerbate and modify the operation of physical processes, with consequences for how those systems operate and the resulting landscapes. Even those human geographers who are literate in quantitative methodologies and are therefore technically equipped for interaction on these terms may find themselves uncomfortable with what they might view as a potential entrapment in scientized understandings and prioritizations of human behaviour.

Some human geographers adopted systems thinking as well, in line with a view that dominated the social sciences in the post-World War II decades: they argued that not only human interactions with their physical environment but also those with other humans – especially interactions over space – could be modelled in similar ways to environmental systems, producing general statements about human behaviour from which integrating theories could be derived (see, for example, Bennett and Chorley 1978; Wilson 2000.) More recently, some human geographers have suggested revitalizing the theorization of nature-society interactions which has led to a transformed appreciation of the interconnections between and hybridities of the relational agencies of non-humans, technologies, discourses and humans. These repositionings have in turn led to calls for radically new dialogues between physical and human geographers which will

open up the space 'between' this division of geographical labours as a richly inhabited one, teaming with the stuff of which all our futures will be made. Already the subject of radical remappings in and through the technologies of life sciences, these lively spaces are fertile ground for revisiting some unfashionable geographical concerns, such as those associated with bio-geography and human ecology, strengthened by the critical insights of more recent thinking in, for example, biophilosophy and anthropology. (Whatmore 1999: 260)

This opening-up very largely refers to those aspects of physical geography that focus on the animate parts of the 'non-human world' – that is, basically biogeography (perhaps also including the geography of soils). Most physical geographers concentrate on the inanimate world, however – as with work in glaciology and hydrology – for which relevant hybridities have yet to be explored in any detail.

A clear distinction between practices on either side of the human-physical binary divide within geography reflects the nature of their subject matter and associated scientific approaches. This difference was encapsulated by Sayer (1992) in his distinction between those scientific practices that assume closed systems and those that assume open systems. In closed-system thinking, the subject matter can be isolated from all other parts of a larger system (such as the global environment) – whether artificially, as in laboratory experiments, or 'naturally', in the field. The isolated system can then be treated as a machine, which always responds to the same stimuli in the same way: it obeys laws. Even when separate systems come into contact, laws still operate – but in much more complex situations (for example, as with a large machine containing a number of subsidiary machines). Such closed-system thinking cannot be assumed for humans – either as individuals or as societies – however: unlike machines (except perhaps for some computers), humans have free will, and they learn, so that they do not necessarily respond to the same stimulus in the same way every time it is encountered – indeed, they may never encounter a stimulus twice, certainly not in the same contingent circumstances (Johnston 1989).

Thus, the epistemology of physical geography, with its emphasis on searching for universal generalizations about the operation of environmental systems, is not applicable to human geography – which is not to say that some of the methods deployed in the former are not relevant in particular situations in the latter. This is one of the major misconceptions that underpins another boundary divide within human geography – between quantitative and qualitative methods. To some, because human geography cannot seek laws therefore it cannot use quantitative methods, since their sole purpose is to do just that. Such a view is strongly refuted – as recognized by Sayer (1992) in his clear distinction between extensive and intensive research. Extensive research involves searching for patterns and relationships in large populations – such as whether there is a relationship between age and turnout at general elections, or whether people living close to nuclear power plants have a greater probability of contracting leukaemia. Identifying such patterns and relationships – usually employing a quantitative methodology as the only way of handling large amounts of information – does not imply that general laws that are applicable at other times and places are being sought; the goal is just to see whether a general relationship holds in that situation alone. Extensive research cannot establish

causation – why one young person abstained at an election, for example, or why somebody living near a power plant contracted leukaemia while a neighbour did not: only intensive research – focusing on the individual cases – can do that, probably using qualitative methods. Quantification is thus a powerful means to an end, not an end in itself: without it, certain patterns and relationships in human affairs might never be identified – such as the now generally accepted link between smoking, lung cancer and premature death.

Because humans operate individually and collectively in open systems, how they act in any particular circumstance will in part reflect their situation. This is exactly the same with physical systems, with immanent processes reacting to contingent conditions (on which see Kennedy 1979): how a tropical cyclone develops depends on the nature of the surface it is crossing, for example. To some extent, therefore, human and physical geography can be seen to be addressing similar problems, despite the great differences in their subject matter – how causation operates in contingent circumstances. For this, they can share a scientific approach – realism, for which Sayer (1992) has provided a clear introduction.

Realism provides a possible basis for dialogue between physical and human geography, therefore. So do other aspects of their common interests, as mapped out by Massey (1999) in terms of a possible conversation around the issue of how to rethink notions of space-time. Massey argues that one of the things which has held physical and human geography apart for so long is the role of physics in producing an assumed model of science from which particular conceptions of time and space are inherited. Rethinking these preconceptions will be a challenging prospect even for those physical geographers willing to explore beyond the boundaries of existing approaches to environmental modelling.

In these examples of bridge-building between human and physical geography, the power of the binary classification still holds considerable sway. Despite genuine and innovative attempts to build human factors into environmental models, and to re-theorize human/non-human interconnections, the middle grounds so created will typically be viewed as ‘physical’ and ‘human’ in origin and nature, although in essence this need not be the case. The power of the binary rests both in the strong categorical assumption that ‘nothing can be one thing and its opposite at the same time’ (Olsson 1980: 36b), and in the professional rigidities and conservatisms which ossify binary divides once established. To some extent, of course, the state of bridge-building between human and physical geographies reflects our earlier discussion of not needing to know how a stage is constructed in order to be able to act on it. This is very clear in the large body of work on resource and environmental management, often presented over the past few decades as an area where physical and human geography can be brought together. This clearly happens: human geographers interested in such matters are concerned with the physical environment, as are physical geographers with human action. But in neither case (see Johnston 1983) has there been serious and balanced interpenetration of concerns: human geographers have not felt the need to understand the physics of beach erosion when grappling with the need for coastal protection; physical geographers have not felt the need to understand why urbanization occurs to analyse the impact of high-density population centres on run-off rates. The binary remains!

Neither is the power of binary thinking bounded between human geography and ‘other’ subjects. Indeed the core message of this book is that human geography's take on the world is replete with ossified binaries that require serious attention. Witness, for example, our use of the binaries ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ – and the various attempts to deconstruct them (as in Pahl 1975). Conventional administrative, imaginative and intellectual boundaries have been developed between these supposedly different kinds of space, and subsequent understandings of changing spatial differentiation have served further to entrench the binary (which is sometimes resurrected in the ‘popular conscience’, as with claims in the UK that attempts to outlaw hunting with dogs are a consequence of urban-dwellers ‘not understanding the rural way of life’). Moreover, urban/rural differences have carried with them other more hidden messages. Returning for a moment to Woolridge and East's (1951) lament for the false dichotomy between human and physical geography, it becomes clear that they view the essential geographical skill – an ‘eye for the country’ – as itself dichotomized between the city and the country.

Such facility is lamentably lost by the modern tube-travelling suburban dweller; few Londoners are aware, save in the most limited sense, of the pattern of their great city, still less of the qualities and characteristics of the ground upon which it stands and of the texture and meaning of its framework of countryside. But the countryman, to this day, builds up a peculiarly full and satisfying knowledge of his physical environment …

In these kinds of ways, the difference between urban and rural goes beyond the material look of the land and implies more deep-seated differences respectively born of a separation from and an attachment to the nature of the physical environment.

Partly as a response to such perceptions, but partly also due to the growth of a ‘rural’ sub-discipline which began to map out the neglect by human geographers of ‘rural areas’ (Cloke 1985; Clout 1972), the rural/urban divide has been kept alive by a binary model of thinking, peddling ideas of separation, difference and even opposition between the urban and its rural other. In practice, however, the divide has become blurred in all kinds of ways. Trends of counter-urbanization have brought supposedly ‘urban’ people into ‘rural’ domains, transforming the characteristics of rurality that had attracted them in the first place. In any case, traditional rural life had already been transformed by the near-universal availability of urban-based media. As Mormont (1990) has outlined, any rural/urban dualism has been completely taken over by events, and rurality has become a multiplicity of social spaces that overlap the same geographical area. Equally, the nature of recent land development has brought suburbs, theme parks, shopping centres, executive estates, industrial parks, tourist developments and the like into what were previously considered to be rural territories thus further reproducing misleading ideas about the city and the country (Wilson 1990). The rural/urban binary, however, has survived this onslaught of material reality and philosophical re-positioning. Calls to recognize the city's countryside as an integrated system (Bryant et al. 1982), to emphasize the significance of events and problems that transcend the rural/urban divide (Hoggart 1990), and to identify a ‘post-rural’ condition (Murdoch and Pratt 1993) have failed to de-stabilize the categorization, identity and power of urban and rural classification. Attempts to establish middle ground from the rural polarity have had little effect. Meanwhile, urban geographers have seemed not to notice any possibility of de-centring the city as a category of understanding.

Binary Power?

Our starting premise in this book is that binary thinking is widespread in human geography and remains a persistent and powerful force in the shaping of landscapes of understanding (Soja and Hooper 1993). Such a dominant position is unsurprising given the place of key binaries in the history of Western thought, which has been shaped by dualistic thinking in terms of self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, active/passive, truth/illusion, and so on (see Pile 1994). Underlying human geography's binaries, however is a pattern of reason which is far from neutral in its logocentric pattern of positive and negative. By classifying the world into A/not-A, B/not-B, C/not-C categories, we commonly, though far from necessarily, ascribe power to one term over the other. As Gibson-Graham (2000) explains in terms of ‘factory/ not factory’ distinctions in economic geography:

The first term in the binary is endowed with positivity at the expense of the other: presence and value are attached to factory while non-factory is absent and devalued. (pp. 97–8)

Binary structures therefore establish relations of opposition and exclusion rather than of sameness and interconnection between the two terms involved. Much of human geography, then, has potentially accepted uncritical accounts of power relations simply by endorsing binary thinking.

Over recent years, however, the unquestioning use of binaries has been put under the spotlight of close critical scrutiny. In part, this critical review has stemmed from a recognition that a whole series of binaries have lost their interpretative sharpness – Benko and Strohmayer (1997), for example, drawing on Vattimo (1988), suggest that new/old, present/past, left/right, progress/ reaction, abstraction/figuration, modernism/ realism and avant-garde/kitsch have all become blurred as part of the wider postmodern condition. More specifically, human geographers have sought to rediscover different understandings of identity. Thus Olsson (1980) discusses ‘the law of the excluded middle’ in which

Everything is identical to itself and nothing is identical to anything else. Nothing is itself and not itself at the same time. (p. 62b)

As Cloke et al. (2004) suggest:

Here he is underlining the assumed singularity of identity, the straightforward oneness and non-contradictoriness of the phenomena being identified, but in so doing he raises a second feature of conventional Western reasoning. This is one which tends to see things in terms of binary oppositions between supposedly dichotomous or mutually exclusive pure essences; not as condensations of many different phenomena, events and aspects fusing together in an overlapping fashion. This is not just to reiterate the finding that conventional reasoning prefers to hold things apart, assigning them to different and separate positions in the 'entity map'…, it is also to indicate its tendency to fix identities by setting up opposites which in a sense define one another. (p. 242)

In this way human geographers have begun to view binary analyses of identity as systems of domination, arguing along with Haraway (1985) that binary traditions have been symptomatic of the logic and practice of domination of a whole list of those who are constituted as others in order to mirror the self – women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals and so on. In particular it has been feminist geographers such as McDowell (1983) who have pioneered the critical reappraisal of binary thinking, noting how core dualistic terms (A, B, C) tend to be masculinized and prioritized, while the subordinate terms (not A, not B, not C) tend to be feminized and dominated. Authors of the Women in Geography Study Group (1997) take this analysis to its logical conclusion by questioning the key taken-for-granted binary of women and men, suggesting that

The notion that we all fit into either a male or female body is just that, notional. It cannot be sustained, either over time or space. Simply put there is nothing 'natural' about 'male' and 'female' bodies. There is nothing natural about everyone being forced into one sex or another. (p. 195)

Such an analysis leads many human geographers to move beyond binary thinking into new forms of interpretative understanding. Before discussing these moves, however, it is worth dwelling for a moment on attempts to defend, police and redevelop the idea of binary thinking. First, we should recognize that some scholars maintain the necessity of using categories to explain the social processes of identity, and that such categorization need not be a negative or regressive force. Jenkins (2000), for example, insists that

Categorization is unavoidable in knowing the social world, and in all social identification. There is no necessary equation of categorization with stigmatization or oppression. Categorization can be positive and valorizing. (p. 20)

Susan Smith's discussion of identity politics concerning race and ethnicity (Chapter 6) presents us with a telling example of how a black/white binary can be a positive political force in the identification of and response to racism. Although not ruling out the benefits of deconstructing such binaries, Smith shows how affirmative action involving positive discrimination can flow from the positive use of binary categories. Secondly, the power or powerlessness of binary thinking can take a number of different forms. As Sayer (1991) has argued, some binaries clearly do suffer from the 'excluded middle' of which Olsson speaks, but others turn out to be more of a continuum than a dichotomy, and yet others suffer because the basic polarities of the binary are either too incoherent or too weak to bear the explanatory weight which is placed upon them. The above discussion of rural/urban in human geography reflects some of these arguments. Thirdly, it has been argued that it may not be necessary to shun the binary 'container' of understanding in order to follow the subtle effects of differences at work within that container. Sayer (1991) points out that in such cases

The differences between entities … are shown to be based upon a repression of the differences within entities … The deconstruction of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values and differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of binary opposition. (p. 285)

Accordingly, for Sayer the task is to examine in practice the multiple meanings of binary terms so as to reveal their limitations and to promote clarifications. Such policing provides an evaluation of the realism of binary rhetoric (see Johnson 1980).

Working beyond Binaries

For many, the philosophical and political flaws of binary thinking, which privileges one term over another and

often represents an expression of power when the supposed opposites are in fact mutually constitutive, has led to a search for ways in which to 'escape the tyranny of dualisms' (Pile 1994: 264). One way of breaking free from binary understandings has been to pursue alternative systems of logic, developing multifaceted and fuzzy logics with which to transcend binary assumptions of either/or (Olsson 1980). Essentially, Olsson's project was to find ways of understanding certainty and uncertainty and clarity and ambiguity simultaneously. The concept of the 'fuzzy set' (that is a category with imprecise boundaries) has now become quite common in quantitative human geographies (see Openshaw and Openshaw 1997), and the wider project of entertaining certainty/ambiguity has formed the basis of philosophical innovation in human geography over recent years. Olsson's own turn was to surrealism, in order to allow crazy notions to inform the imposition of order (see Sparke 1994). Here, however, we want to give brief mention to four other moves which in different ways have sought to undo binary oppositions and take hold of certainty and ambiguity in new forms.

First, it is important to take note of the continuity in human geography of an emphasis on dialectics to resolve binary oppositions. In dialectics, according to Olsson (1980), 'every category includes both itself and its opposite' (p. 36b) and this trait has been carried through in analyses of the processes, flows and relations which give rise to systems and structures (Harvey 1996). These processes and flows operate in contradictory fashion and contain possibilities for change. They are thus capable of transforming the systems and structures they create. A focus on dialectics therefore maintains a metaphysical framework of binary opposition, but emphasizes difference as contradiction within that framework.

In similar vein, human geographers have taken to heart Giddens' (1981, 1985, 1989) project of structuration which focuses on the dualities of structure and agency, and argues for a non-functionalist bringing together of this supposed binary. Giddens' call is to recognize both the 'duality of structure' – that is, the manner in which structures enable behaviour, but behaviour can potentially influence and reconstitute structure – and the 'duality of structure and agency' – that is transcending the dualism of deterministic views of structure and voluntaristic views of agency. Essentially Giddens was seeking to replace the traditional dualism at the heart of social theory with a duality by claiming that

Structure was instead implicated in every moment of action – that it was at once constraining and enabling – and that, conversely structure was an 'absent' order of differences, present only in the constituting moments of interaction through which it was itself reproduced or transformed. (Gregory 1994: 112)

Thus the subjugation of the secondary term of a binary by the primary may be reconceived in terms of each term being able, simultaneously, to enable and constrain the other. As with dialectics, this idea of duality maintains the metaphysics of binary relationship as a two-way street of shaping and being shaped (see Nicky Gregson's chapter on structure and agency).

Others wishing to detach further from a framework of binaries have become interested in opening up a 'third' ground between seemingly polar binaries. This project can be pursued via the use of 'third terms', for example by focusing on sexuality to recognize alternative possibilities and experiences from those suggested by a simple binary analysis of man/woman. In some cases, third terms can simply point to the middle ground of a continuum between polarities – the longstanding categorization of 'suburban' and 'environmental', for example, serve this purpose in urban/rural and physical/ human distinctions respectively. However, the use of third terms to inspire non-binary analysis potentially goes far beyond a mere elucidation of middle ground. As Lynda Johnston (Chapter 7) demonstrates, studies of sexuality have highlighted the importance not only of heterosexual and homosexual spaces, but also of the notion of 'camp', which interconnects such categories in new ways.

Use of third terms links with a significant turn towards the critical potential of 'third spaces' (Bhabha 1990; Soja 1996). Third space refers to spaces that transcend what is produced by binary processes. So whereas dividing the world for example between the rich and exploitative West and the poor and exploited remainder, has produced interesting and politically important geographies of development, it has been possible to challenge this binary distinction in such a way as to recognize more complex post-colonial spaces in which new forms of otherness can emerge and different kinds of identity can be acted out. Third spaces thus combine the material and the symbolic to elude the politics of polarized binaries and to enable the emergence of radical new allegiances by which old structures of authority can be challenged by new ways of thinking

and new emancipatory practices. Pile (1994) argues strongly for the usefulness of third space. It permits: a positioning of socially constructed binaries within contexts of dissimilarity; an appreciation of how the values established by power-laden binaries can be decoded and challenged; a recognition of the potential which exists beyond the interconnecting power of binaries; and an understanding of the fluidity of space when thinking through 'the ways in which the fabric of this third space is continually fragmented, fractured, incomplete, uncertain and the site of struggles for meaning and representation' (p. 273).

These fluid characteristics of third space reflect a dissatisfaction with the fixities produced by binary thinking which is also at the heart of the move towards deconstruction in social science. The adoption of Derrida's (1967) post-structuralist approach has sought to confirm the creation of meaning as an unfinished process and as a space in which alternatives can be generated through political struggle. The practice of deconstruction works directly against binary metaphysics of presence and power. Binaries operate by encoding a form of master signifier which in turn exerts a certain kind of stability on the politics of difference. Deconstruction unpicks this overarching structure of signification and presents a philosophical means by which human geographers can reconsider the notion of difference beyond the fixity of binary and hierarchical restrictions, and engage in the process of developing radically heterogeneous spaces. Merely to reverse the value and power of binaries, for example by espousing the rights of woman over man, or black over white, can leave the fixed structure of understanding intact. As Gibson-Graham (2000) argues, it is more potent to

blur the boundaries between the terms highlighting similarities on both sides of the divide, undermining the solidity and fixity of identity/presence, showing how the excluded 'other' is so embedded within the primary identity that its distinctiveness is ultimately unsustainable. (p. 99)

Deconstruction, then, recognizes that incorporation of excluded others within binary frameworks serves to familiarize a particular form of 'other' identity and thereby hollow out the meaningfulness of that identity (Doel 1999a,b). Instead, this approach points us to moments and sites of contradiction, indecision and deferral of meaning, and leads us to argue that no overarching sign can adequately convey structures of meaning which will be continually compromised by ever-changing and incomplete texts and contexts.

The move to deconstruction, then, replaces binary thinking with more fluid conversations within which new languages and politics of identity and possibility can emerge. For some human geographers, these conversations are most significantly focused on the performativities of being and becoming. Thrift (2000), for example, drawing on Deleuzian ideas of smooth and striated space, points us to the multiplicity of space-times, urging attention to how events are shaped as they happen and seeking to distance us from 'the vapid certainties of so much current cultural work' by seeking to understand 'what is carried in and carried away by different voyagers and beings in becoming' (p. 215). His emphasis is on effectivity rather than representation, on the how rather than the what, and he regards the flexibility and instability of space as a virtue of potential, reflecting endless possibility in a fleeting, dialogical and risky context which in its purest form cannot be written about, or stabilized.

It will be evident that these four moves beyond binary frameworks – dialectics, dualities, third spaces and deconstructions – reflect strongly differentiated degrees of willingness to dispense with the stuff of which binaries have been made. There is also significant variation in the ways in which political-economic materialities are retained/released, focus is dominated/shared by the cultural, and emphasis is placed on the representative/non-representative. Clearly a wish to move beyond binary thinking in human geography has itself broken free from any overarching political and ethical projects, and from any sense of certainty about how to research or even apply our understandings in the material world out there. There is perhaps a danger here that new binaries are being introduced surreptitiously, for example between the cultural and the political/economic, the representative and the non-representative, the historical and the momentary, the writable and the unwritable, the ethical and the post-ethical, the knowable and the unknowable. If so, the very fluidity of deconstruction in human geography will only have served to fuel moments of reconstruction, albeit using different frames of reference and understanding.

About the Book

In this book we have asked authors to write about a particular binary associated with the construction of

human geographic thought. We are interested both in the ways in which human geographers have made specific use of broader conceptual materials in order to produce 'geographical' concepts and ideas, and in the ways in which such usage has often taken a particular shape – that of working with seemingly bilateral or binary ideas in order to map out the philosophical and conceptual territories of the subject. The book therefore focuses specifically on the bilateral dialogues which have characterized the formation of human geographical thought. Such binaries are clearly not necessarily dichotomous. What marks them out as significant is the way in which they have become co-constitutive, the one usually being discussed by direct reference to the other.

Our aim, therefore, has been to bring together a collection of carefully constructed essays on the key conceptual binaries which have been critical in the ways in which human geography has been, and continues to be theorized. The essays both chart the significance of a particular binary in the co-constitution of geographic thought, and demonstrate how the polar significance of binary elements has been deconstructed in more recent attempts to unsettle the meta-narratives of modernist philosophies in human geography. Individual authors have been given considerable latitude in their task, and the resultant chapters will therefore reflect both that authorial individuality and a sense in which some binaries have been more prone to particular forms of deconstruction than others.

We do not claim that the list of chapters represents a complete suite of binaries in human geography. Indeed, one chapter that was due to be included was not delivered, leaving at least one omission. Equally, the book has taken some time to produce. Some authors produced their chapters somewhat earlier than others, and have had to wait some considerable time for other chapters to come in. We apologize to you for this frustrating but unavoidable delay. However, we believe that the book marks out a significantly different cut across most existing narratives of philosophical, theoretical and conceptual thinking in human geography, and we trust that it will contribute in some small way to a continued liveliness of debate and dialogue in our subject.

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- human geography
- physical geography
- geography
- deconstruction
- categorization
- urban
- dialectics

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