

REVIEW ESSAY

SEMIOTICS, MARXISM AND SPATIAL CONCEPTION: A NEW PARADIGM?

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Meaning and Geography: The Social Conception of the Region in Northern Greece. By Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992. 452 pp. £94.20 or DM 238.00. ISBN 3 11 012956 6.

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This review essay first critiques the book, *Meaning and Geography* before discussing some of the issues it raises, mainly concerning the author's proposed integration and creation of philosophical paradigms.

Meaning and Geography raises some important philosophical questions concerning the integration of paradigms, which it tries to answer with evidence from a large spatial conception study of northern Greece. It should be of value to those researchers attempting to integrate the concepts of space, place and social theory. Despite its worth, the book is difficult to follow in parts, and demands background knowledge in semiotics, marxism and social theory.

The 'flyer' for this book states that the authors aimed to:

evaluate the validity of spatial semiotics in the study of regional representations and the capacity of semiotics for integrating knowledge accumulated in the other cognitive fields orientated towards the study of space

and hoped to create a:

methodological bridge between semiotics and sociology, integrating knowledge from behavioral geography and environmental psychology.

The flyer provides a useful summary of the study's intentions which is lacking in the book it-

self. The book fundamentally fails to provide the reader with an introduction which clearly sets out the contents and justification for the book's publication. It is left to the reader to wade through the first few chapters before the intention is revealed.

The second flaw, is that the authors fail to explain what spatial semiotics are, why they might be important and why the reader might want to integrate them into their research on spatial representation and conceptualization. Given the centrality of this concept in their arguments this is a considerable omission. It is left to the reader to wade through a section on research philosophy to decipher what the study of semiotics is, and where it originated from. Basically spatial semiotics is the study of spatial sign systems and sign processes. There are spatial features or 'icons' which signify cultural meaning and identity. The cultural landscape is treated as a sign system, whose inner meaning can be decoded through a sequence of logical operations and transformations. For example, certain landmarks or places denote cultural identity and meaning. An English example of this would be Buckingham Palace, the home to the royal family, signifying to some, power, national pride and heritage. It is argued that we possess a unified semiotic coding

system, which uses universal semiotic laws to allow us to conceptualize reality.

This book is essentially aimed at investigating these universal laws in relation to how four groups of respondents conceptualized the region of Macedonia in northern Greece. It examines both the theoretical and practical implications and the constraints of such an investigation, and in this respect it partially achieves the goals outlined in the flyer. The theorizing and advice for practical investigation are supported throughout by real world evidence of an empirical study examining how Macedonian residents conceptualize their home region, and the implications for spatial conceptualization theory. This is achieved using a combination of subjective interviews and objective exercises, namely sketch maps, using a philosophical backdrop of an interesting combination of marxism and semiotics.

The book is divided into six main sections. The first section contains two chapters examining theories of space. The first chapter discusses the philosophical roots of semiotics, and the different philosophical viewpoints concerning space. Although difficult reading, it adequately covers the positivist, humanistic, behavioural and marxist views of space and their roles in understanding spatial behaviour and spatial conception. The second chapter discusses the interactions of society, space and meaning, critically appraising the behavioural geography and environmental psychology approaches, where spatial behaviour and spatial products are seen as the result of subjective processes. From a marxist perspective they argue that although the behavioural approach is appealing, it is flawed because it disregards the major structures within society which influence spatial behaviour. They argue against cognitive psychology which underpins much of behavioural geography and environmental psychology, proposing 'social semiotics' as the underlying basis of behaviour (p. 43).

They state that their work is based upon the integration of semiotics with the marxist theory of ideology, and more specifically marxist approaches to space and meaning. Preferring not to elaborate greatly on the epistemological problems arising from such an attempt, they present what they themselves term a 'somewhat over-simplified presentation' (p. 32) of this merger. This is a folly, because although they outline the reasons why integration is difficult, they fail to state how they have attempted to forge this new paradigm.

They argue that although 'there are irreconcilable differences between the paradigms underlying historical materialism and semiotics', such a merger

would create a paradigm which gives a more holistic underpinning to spatial behaviour and conceptualization. Basically historical materialism 'gives priority to the social and historical dynamic and the socioeconomic processes composing it. It sees the production of semiosis as springing mainly from these processes, and seeks to find the regularities of that production in sociohistorical terms' (p. 32). Semiotics, conversely are based upon structuralism and logical positivism, which seeks to detach semiosis from sociohistorical processes and attempts to formulate its regularities in universal terms.

They then outline the basic premises which make them conflicting. 'Semiotics operates principally with the static concepts of structure and system, while Marxism emphasizes the structuring processes and the functioning of systems. Semiotics uses the law of pertinence to isolate the study of signifying practices and the systems of signification from socioeconomic processes, Marxism immerses these practices and systems in material processes in an attempt to understand and explain them as one of the aspects of society as a whole. Semiotics is obsessed with synchronicity, with the study of systems in their immobility; Marxism is orientated toward historically and sociologically moving realities'. If these premises are so conflicting, it is surely worth describing in detail? This account should have been available to the reader.

They argue that even with these difficulties this integration is a worthwhile practice because 'semiotics offers a complete, and complex theory of meaning, a theory which would enable a marxist approach to analyze cultural phenomena with required sophistication' (p. 33). They further argue that semiotic study is the most powerful tool we possess for in-depth analysis of ideology, culture and systems of meaning. In combination with Marxism it would lead to a powerful theory of cultural phenomena and spatial conception incorporating social and historical dynamics. Chapter three further outlines and advocates the marxist perspective of space in combination with semiotics.

Section two outlines the study space and data collection. Chapter four gives a detailed account of the research area (Macedonia), the settlements chosen for study and their regional context. This is of topical interest with the current 'ethnic and cultural' war in Yugoslavia. Chapter five details the data collection and the sociological based differences in environmental conception. Given the 'new' underlying paradigm, the only real difference in data collection appears to be that semiotics delimits its data on the *corpus* (what it is studying, in this

case social class, gender and age upon the spatial conception of a region) rather than the sample (who it is studying). It appears that another difference is the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection. It is possible though for researchers to follow this approach under a paradigm combining elements of analytical and humanistic behavioural geography. The data were collected two ways, linguistically and through sketch maps. The linguistic data were analysed using a textural analysis of structural semantics, thematic content analysis, and mapping semiotic information onto topographical base maps. The sketch maps were analysed using a variety subjective classifications (Appleyard; Lynch; Pocock; Murray and Spencer). They produced objective results in the form of frequency counts and cross-tabulations.

Sections three, four and five discuss the study, the results and explanations. These have only been minimally elaborated upon in this review, but they contain a good discussion on the use and interpretation of sketch maps and linguistic data. Section three discusses people's social construction and evaluation of spaces, their regional images and the factors that influence them. It talks in detail about the sociological differences that could influence people's conception, and the possibilities for a multitude of conceptual spaces of the same region using the results from their study. Section four and five examines how people talk about space and how they imagine that space. They discuss models of regional space and the richness, complexity and relevance of the regional discourse. Sketch mapping and the knowledge it portrays, regional images and the geographical accuracy of the sketch map data are also considered.

Section six concludes the findings of the book both for the empirical study and the philosophical arguments. The studies main finding was that sociological factors such as social class, gender and age (they argue that these are key variables in Marxist theory) influence modes of meaning of the region. They therefore suggest that there is a social semiotics of space, which can be studied using a philosophical base which combines marxism and semiotic theory.

Such an integration of paradigms may well be the future for research in general, and in particular spatial conceptualization. It is now not uncommon to find studies that use combined paradigms to theoretically underpin their investigation, and some studies that seem to use none. The reason for this is probably an increasing disillusionment with the strong traditional research philosophies, that allow only constricted viewpoints and investigative practices. It is becoming clear to many that to gain a

more holistic and 'truthful' view of a topic that a range of techniques must be used, from across a paradigmatic spectrum. In effect we need paradigms that allow a wider choice of data collection and methods of analysis which retain strong theoretical underpinnings.

In human geography, to gain a strong conceptual validity, the philosophical backdrop for a study of spatial conception would have been traditionally analytical behavioural geography or humanistic geography. It may well be the case though, that the use of elements from both of these paradigms would be a sensible course. This would allow the use of more data collection and analysis techniques, whilst remaining theoretically strong, drawing theory and evidence from both paradigms and research in psychology, geography, planning and cognitive science.

Meaning and Geography, and much postmodern research suggests that such 'new' philosophical backdrops can be created and used successfully to theoretically underpin research. It is becoming the responsibility of researchers to find a theoretical solution that outlines their own personal belief's rather than 'blindly' following the historical doctrine of the past philosophers. This may involve serious philosophical thought for researchers, questioning their current allegiance, but may prove to be a valuable and worthwhile venture. These philosophical backdrops are obviously individually sculptured and only with adoption by other researchers become paradigms. Whether the combination of semiotics and Marxism becomes a paradigm, time will tell, but without a strong detailed explanation and description of such a merger, *Meaning and Geography* may remain the hidden catalyst rather than the sought reference book.

Meaning and Geography is not a book for the theoretical or philosophically weak hearted. It attempts to tackle (with some success) important theoretical and practical questions, and should have some relevance to all those who study spatial representation and conception of the 'real world', but at as an expensive buy it probably will not find its way onto many shelves. Its fundamental failing is that it is written for researchers already versed in semiotics and with a background understanding of the principles of Marxism and Structuralism. Given this, it will provide a difficult read to newcomers to the area and restricts itself from a wider audience. This review has hopefully outlined some of these questions, stressed the need for these questions to be asked, and noted the difficulties and needs of paradigm integration or creation in the search for 'the truth'. It is clear that there is much room for work in this area.