Behavioural geography in francophone countries

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Reference

The influence of such cultural concerns indicates that French regional geography was never a truly positivist science (Berdoulay, 1978). Even though the morphological approach was closely related in many respects to that of the natural sciences, this did not preclude the consideration of the subjective world. This general theme has been sustained: for example, Brunhes (1947) has emphasized the importance of local superstitions and folklore as a route to understanding forces that were not directly observable. Defontaines (1968) has looked at the attitudes of different cultural groups towards life and death. Similarly, Gallais (1967) has studied the lived space of the Peul peoples, finding that the understanding of fundamental territorial units (leydos) used by these peoples was only possible with a deep knowledge of local languages — and, at the same time, becoming aware of his own subjectivity and potential bias as a researcher and attempting, then, to see the world through other eyes.

Although, in these studies, one cannot find any clear definition of a 'geography of perception', a broad conception of such an area of research emerged. The roots in classical French regional geography can be seen in the analysis of behaviours and practices in varied social and cultural contexts. Unlike the Anglo-American developments following quantification of the discipline, the analysis was not concerned with a microscale geography, centred on modelling decisions at an individual level, but rather, looked at the human dynamics of events in a framework of social values. Perhaps to a greater extent than in the English-speaking world, moreover, the emergence of a behavioural geography in France was strongly influenced by the mainstreams of thought in related social sciences. In the first section of this paper, an overview of French contributions in the cognate social science disciplines of psychology, sociology and anthropology is presented, as well as some comments on the background influences of philosophical writings. Subsequently, these various strands are brought together in a review of recent studies in behavioural geography, stressing both applied and theoretical approaches.

I Social science in French-speaking countries

I Developments in psychology

There is no need to recall in detail the pioneering work of Piaget (1936; 1948) on the perception of the child and the progressive accumulation of geometric abilities. It is sufficient to note that the influence of this research on contemporary thought in the social sciences was as great (if not greater) in France as it was elsewhere. Among research that is less well known outside French-speaking countries, but which was carried out in the same period as that of the Geneva school, is that of Guillaume (1937) on the Gestalt psychology of form. The work of Frances (1963) was also influential in the emphasis given to the organization of mental images, its evolution over time, the meaning given to objects, the role of motivation, and the autonomy of social perceptions. Such research movements vitiated the concurrent...
developments in (especially) American branches of the discipline based on psychophysics, for example.

The traditional strength and popularity of these schools of thought has tended to elevate the status of the cognitive approach and, in contrast to situations elsewhere, inhibit the development of behaviourism. Rather less importance was attached to the formulation of stimulus-response theory in the French-speaking world than was the case in Britain and North America. Consequently, the influence of such mechanistic concepts on the social sciences and human geography, in particular, has been much less. Instead, the cognitive perspective has been used far more extensively in an attempt to understand the mechanisms of image formation, within a temporal and sociocultural framework.

A striking example of such an approach is provided by Pailhous (1970). Through the study of route patterns chosen by old and new taxi drivers, Pailhous was able to interpret their spatial images and to relate these to drivers’ behaviour. As a taxi-driver’s experience deepens, his perceived road network becomes more accurate, but this is accompanied by a reduction in image content of the secondary network, which is used only to penetrate the interstitial neighbourhood units. This is explained by the practice of deciphering the coordinates of landmarks and focal points, which enable the driver to establish basic topological relationships between areas. At each crossroad, for example, the taxi driver chooses the main route which forms a minimum angle with the estimated location of the destination—the algorithmic rule. By analogy, then, a town dweller rebuilds the objective town by coding spatial information, which then provides the bases of individual behaviour.

The practice of drawing analogies between human and animal behaviour is another trait of behaviourism that has been dismissed by many French psychologists. Lecuyer (1975), for example, stresses the importance of social dynamics in the analysis of human spatial relationships. In contrast to the abstract proxemics of Edward Hall (1966), Lecuyer replaces the concept of personal space by that of interpersonal distance: human relationships, in this view, can be seen as largely governed by such interpersonal distances, which themselves are compatible with certain communication modes—a subset of elements that might comprise a given social situation at a certain point in time.

A similar theme can be found in the work of Moles and Rohmer (1976) on the micropsychology of daily life. The apparently continuous nature of social activities can be divided into individual acts—forms to be completed, counters to be visited, etc.—all of which form a part of the daily routine. The analysis of waiting, for instance, an integral part of daily routine, involves examination of a whole range of human microbehaviours, such as violence and aggression. Other behavioural outcomes that have received attention at this scale include: the loss of identity by people who have been hospitalized for some length of time (Leroy, 1977); various psychological problems in young children confronted with sudden changes in warders and routine (Leroy, 1977); and the disruption experienced by the elderly when forced to leave their accustomed environment (Cribier, 1978). In each case individual freedom is limited by spatial restrictions which are socially specific to the situation.

The theme that emerges from these researches is ‘one body and environment’, inseparably bound. A person is first and foremost, part of a family; then, successively, a member of a certain sociocultural group, of a neighbourhood unit, of a town, a region and a country. Each change of territorial scale introduces different sets of constraints, which in turn might lead to characteristic responses.

2 Sociology, semiology and structuralism

French sociologists have also expressed an interest in society/environment relationships, albeit somewhat later than psychologists. As in many other countries, a primary focus of concern has been an appraisal of the neighbourhood unit concept in terms of residential design. Chombart de Lauwe (1968) was a pioneer in this field of research. A rather different approach is seen in the analysis of the social context and meaning of environmental images. Ledrut (1973) provides an illustration of this theme in work on the ‘dream town’ of the inhabitants of Toulouse. The semantic analysis of signs in a town affords a valuable insight into both individual and collective life and the symbolic nature of behaviour. The town centre, for example, becomes a show case where each individual relates to a particular venue, in a way, largely related to characteristics such as socioeconomic status, sex, age, background and lifestyle.

The attachment of town dwellers to their place of residence and their connections with the centre of town has become a major focus of research in urban sociology in French-speaking countries. Debruelle and Roggemans (1974), for example, conducted a survey of 2269 inhabitants of Brussels in order to examine images of the urban fabric. Some distinct social groupings were evident, related to age, socioeconomic status and stability of residence. Younger adults, and those of higher socioeconomic status, for example, are particularly drawn to the centre, but the latter offers fewer attractions for the manual labourer, and for older town dwellers. Similarly, Zeitoun et al. (1979) have related the coexistence of topological objects to the two dimensions of spatial and cultural meaning. By focusing on the dialectics of signifier and signified, of word and object, a structuralist perspective is introduced. The semiotics of space are complex, and researchers attempt to bring into a single focus both groups with different power bases and the signs/symbols/messages that express such differential power. Indicators can have evident or hidden meanings (L’Espace Géographique, 1974; see especially Brunet) and their interpretation can be made from functional (e.g. planning) or analytical/process viewpoints (Levy, 1978).

A similar relationship between cognitive and structuralist approaches is also central to the work of Soucy (1967; 1971), who draws on Barthes’s (1957) concept of city mythologies in comparing the different meanings given to the city centre in western and Japanese towns. Soucy extracts (from various sources: Butor, 1957; Le Clezio, 1970; Rochefort, 1969; Perec, 1965) those elements
that enable a structural analysis of the language of urban fabric. The town centre becomes the locale for the collective consumption of signs, the ideal place for promulgation of symbols by dominant groups. The centre has a different symbolic meaning for different social groups, who consequently adopt a range of different behavioural strategies. An example of the latter would be the propaganda of estate agents in their efforts to manufacture appropriate images for particular districts. In other words, it was recognized that there is not simply one dialogue with respect to the town, but many interpretations perpetuated by the various groups that frequent it, especially by those occupying various positions of power and authority. Although these ideas are very much part of the Anglo-American social sciences, it is interesting to note that they were already well established in the French-speaking world by the 1950s (Barthes, 1957).

Since then, the urban landscape has essentially been conceived as a code, an ensemble of signs determined by certain members of society. The manufacture of these signs as symbols by dominant social groups serves to render the environment understandable and ‘consumable’ for the majority. The environment thus takes on the economic values of affluent groups, who seek to impose oral and graphic codes on the behaviour of the individual. In ‘reading’ the town centre, then, based on these uniform codes, consumers are ‘aided’ in their decision processes through these landmarks. In this way, spatial semiology highlights the role played by dominant groups in society, and the relative levels of power and authority of conflicting groups. A science of information inputs emerges, closely related to the study of class structures in a society with heterogeneous and diverse objectives.

3 Ethnology and philosophy

In their efforts to interpret environmental meaning, many ethnologists have also adopted a structuralist stance by stressing the importance of social relationships in determining individual behaviour. Balz et al. (1976), for example, employ a comparative matrix, incorporating descriptor variables that relate to both physical (‘given’) and social (‘produced’) space, in order to examine the sense of place and community displayed by various Mediterranean communities. Feelings of ‘belonging’, circumscribing zones of reference away from a local home community, are then contrasted with ‘foreign’ places, psychologically distanced.

Boughali (1974) emphasizes the importance of structuralist concepts in contrasting the sterility of modern life with that of traditional Morocco. In accordance with ancient rites, a newborn child is delivered on a large dish of earth, covered with a white cloth. The earth is then thrown out of the house for protection and to announce the new arrival to the invisible forces. Space and time are thus sanctified, complementary features of the same existence, blending the myths of life from birth to death. By reconstituting the deep roots of tradition, one is able to appreciate the psychosociological bases of territorial behaviour.

A place is nothing in isolation. It achieves sensibility only through its relation with other places and individuals. The manner in which places are interpreted is determined by cultural heritage, by social practices and antecedent conditions. Bachelard (1957) introduced the notion of a poetry of space, a living frame within which each part assumes a significance. In the work of Sansot (1975) space presents itself freely through its description in speech per se, which exists and expresses itself without scientific pretension. Poetry highlights the quality of certain places linked to man, his joys, his sorrows. Prostitutes and tramps are subjects which allow us to sketch an essay of liberation in a world of alienation, of escape from despair. Even traffic has symbolic elements and can invoke the poetic depth of the suburbs, of the street, of the weekend cottage (Sansot et al., 1978). Secondary environments for leisure activities are, in the first instance, the product of an imagination that is inherent in every kind of social life. The ingenuity of the ruling classes lies in the legitimation of the weekend cottage by the spatial appropriation of a diffuse and scarce phenomenon. The ‘logic’ of contemporary society stretches far beyond work and production in this research, although many features of urban and rural landscapes have only recently been investigated from the viewpoint of ‘ideology in space’ (Racine et al., 1979).

Within such an image of social science research, there are undoubtedly weaknesses of theory, methodology and interpretation. It would be wrong, however, to dwell upon superficial criticism. A more valuable observation is that in the French-speaking world, the structuralist-marxist connection is explicit, whilst marxist approaches in North America tend to feed more into traditional political critique. Consequently, the latter tend to be less well-informed of the philosophical bases emanating from structuralism. The role played by society in restricting individual choice has provided an overall setting for consideration of the more specific paradigms that have tended to preoccupy social scientists in Britain and North America. This may be due to a rather more extended marxist tradition, which has encouraged analysis by social group as opposed to the individual.

II Behavioural geography in French-speaking countries

The overall effect of exposure to the diverse influences described in the previous section has been to produce a distinctive approach to the analysis of human activity.

1 Behavioural geography as an applied field of research

As in the English-speaking world, urban centres and neighbourhood units have been the subject of the greatest number of applied studies and have emphasized three major elements: i) the environment and its components, as experienced by individuals through their learning processes and daily lives; ii) societal ideology, giving meaning to places by establishing relations between places and individuals; iii) the functional components of mental images especially when linked to social status and individual characteristics (age, sex, etc.). Most of these studies employ
standard psychometric techniques and are designed to aid in understanding the dimensions of contemporary (urban) society at two levels: one which relates to the production, and the other to the consumption, of space — to planners and users.

The city centre, for example, is in the first instance a place of historical and social symbolism, manifested through well-designated places and by daily activities (Ferras and Vigouroux, 1978; Bailly and Woessner, 1979). Only the minor or secondary environment differs from one individual to another because of immediate interests, essential for particular purposes, such as shopping, work or recreation.

Common images owe a great deal to cultural models, stereotypes of geographies of the mind. This homogeneity is the major characteristic of the image: learning processes, language, education and the media all contribute to a standardized, idealized image of city structure. It was noted in Mulhouse (Bailly and Woessner, 1979), however, that in most French cities there are two images of the centre, corresponding to two different socioeconomic classes that utilize two different areas. Piolle (1977), with reference to Pau (France) and Merenne-Schoumaker (1974; 1979) to Liege (Belgium) confirm this double image.

Merenne-Schoumaker cites four main groups of variables as responsible for differences in urban perceptions: age, sex, socioprofessional status and socio-geographical factors, such as length and location of residence. Shopkeepers and businessmen tend to locate in accordance with such 'controls'. The image is therefore seen to be a particularly important dimension of consumer behaviour.

Having identified the component parts of the image, the behavioural geographer is able to propose certain policy recommendations. For example, Bailly (1977) produced a masterplan for the medium-sized city of Belfort, specifying those elements that should be considered in any development programme. By identifying the key elements — main axes, central core, limits . . . — he was able to divide the city into homogeneous sectors in which structural controls (economic and social) could be established. In most studies of urban change, these methods produce new sets of information inputs available for planning decisions. Potentially, in this way an effective democratic role could be played by the public — given that such information is used in the decision process. Certainly, one might attempt to avoid the conflicts generated by much urban development: one clear example is the creation of a hospital complex (CHUV) in Lausanne (Racine et al., 1979).

By identifying the advantaged-environments of certain groups in our societies (residential, commercial, leisure, etc.) a spatial image can be linked with common organizations and actions. This approach necessitates taking into account not only the cognitive perspectives of behavioural geography, but also structuralist approaches. At issue here is a transition from 'the surface of indifference' of classical geography (and neoclassical economics) to 'the surfaces of aspiration' of groups of individuals sharing common values.

2 Behavioural geography, symbolism and attitudes towards space

Frémont best develops, in La région, espace vécu (1976), the importance of affectivity, of symbolism, in a French regional geography long characterized by positivism and the role of the natural environment. Here the break with physical geography is accomplished, the perspective becomes centred on individuals and their psychological activities. This geography does not insist, as Anglo Saxon behavioural geography does, upon cognitive processes, urban paths, natural hazards, etc., but on a synthetic concept — 'living space' — to better understand regional and local sense of place.

This living space depends first on the relations between man and space through the perception of distance. Gallais's (1967) research in Africa allows us to differentiate objective distance, time-distance, (common in geography textbooks) from affective distance (human shells linked to territoriality), ecological distance (society-environment relations, for example resulting in tribal societies from agricultural practice) and structural distance (referring to social practice, mainly cultural and linguistic).

Cognitive experience, however, can be expressed through spatial concepts. Within this framework, an analysis of spatial properties has been undertaken in Belfort, France (Bailly, 1977): a four-fold typology resulted. For example, topological properties of knowledge of the city (e.g. relations of proximity, of identity, of symmetry) can be derived from direct daily relations lived out within the urban scene (life in the suburbs for housewives, linear visual flow for car drivers), and these formed a first category. The second is composed of projective, temporal properties, illustrating the perception of time in the landscape. Images evolve historically through individual interpretations of buildings, perspectives on transformations (projections of dynamic elements) and the integrations of historical and religious myths. Symbolic properties, linked with the representation of space, are expressed through perceptions such as the magnetism of the centre, its opposition to peripheral areas, and (spatial) differences (architectural and sociocultural) between neighbourhoods.

Bailly completes this typology with a set of geographical properties on the variety of images: main axes, relations between axes and landmarks, important masses (built and not built), coordinates (orientation, imposed axes such as bridges) and constraints (visual and administrative). City dwellers then, organize the concepts of their environment in terms of topological, projective, symbolic and geographical characteristics. Implicit in these concepts, we can identify the perception of continuities and of discontinuities, the dialectic relations between centres and suburbs . . . a whole set of attributes in two or three dimensions (surface and volume) . . . all resting on the subjective and symbolic perception of distance and time (Bailly, 1981).

An egocentric orientation therefore reveals itself with frames of reference varying according to living spaces. The 'known' spatial network constitutes a perceptual prism. Thus Frémont makes distinctions between the fluid regions (those where people do not feel at home), home districts where people have their roots (places belong to people and people to places) and the functional regions (areas of standardized industrial society). The interpretation rests on numerous
studies carried out as much on regions (Séminaire de recherches de Bénouville, 1973) as through literary texts (Frémont, 1980). For example, images of Normandy vary according to the actors, who may be administrators, job creators, public at large, Parisians. On the positive side one notes the calm, the tranquillity, the countryside, gastronomy, the presence of the sea, the private dwellings, the sweetness of life; on the negative side, boredom, moral conservatism, the apathy of the inhabitants, the absence of industries and of facilities, the damp climate, the list could longer – but what is important is the point of view, chosen by the actor. Thus, Maupassant (Frémont, 1980) explains the fullness of a peasant society by referring to established values which allow one to regulate not only the whole of social relations (relations between peasants, notables, town dwellers) but also the role played by money and pleasure. Values, then, constitute a framework for the analysis of social relations, seeking to explicate the way in which ideology permeates the lived space (one example of the extended marxist tradition referred to earlier).

In this geography of territorial life, literary references abound, Madame Bovary at Rouen for Frémont, the novelists and the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for Bailly (1977), and even the Bible for Piveteau (1978). Piveteau thus shows how, in the second half of the sixth century, the living space of the Hebrew people combines the traces of gradual sedentariness, of lively political union and displays of relations with God which allow collective appropriation of a definitive area. Regaining possession of this territory is dependant upon choice, on divine grace. Conversely, exile is the sign of disgrace.

In each of the literary forms analysed, Bailly (1977) establishes those themes common to the novelists and poets. This reveals the concern felt to restore geographical scale (through a bird’s eye view or through travel), to lay out symbolic and personal guiding marks, and to present logical schemes in the function of life. The towns, mirrors of society, will prove to be both pleasant dreams and nightmares.

III Conclusion

Geographic space is not a fixed concept but a progressive construct built through a long learning process. Our life is made of relations in two or three dimension (distance, surface and volumes), relations being characterized by geometrical, topological, projective, temporal and symbolic properties. Thus space carries multiple symbolic meanings, societal and cultural, but also personal (desires and frustrations); it illustrates a fundamental contradiction: living space is lived through each individual intimately, but also through society. Images and attitudes depend upon the desires and frustrations of individuals, supported by and reflecting dominant ideologies.

Very different from Anglo-American research, ‘French’ behavioural geography was never a truly positivist science and is mainly an extension of traditional geography. Consequently there has been no split between the applied field of research and the humanistic perspective. Both were exposed to the influence of structuralism. ‘French’ behavioural geography was never termed ‘revolutionary’ and considered as an alternative to conventional analysis. Our presentation of various studies shows how French-speaking geographers have tried to coordinate the different perspectives of cognition and structuralism with the behavioural approach. Subjectivity is opposed to objectivity, affective to materialism, psychology to economy. Geography becomes centred on the study of relations between individuals and space and it must now apprehend forces not directly observable. An examination of spatial concepts, aware of their ideological bases, will allow us to propose an explanation relating to the experience of life. It is in this direction that we proceed for ‘geography needs to be reexamined conceptually’ (Raffestin, 1978).

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IV References