

Extreme Geography

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"If you look too deeply into the abyss, the abyss will look into you."
– Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction:

A recent editorial in the *Annals* of the Association of American Geographers (Dixon and Jones, 1996) presented an entertaining deconstructive reading of scientific geography. This innovative essay, titled "For a *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* Scientific Geography" demonstrates how a popular deconstructive method adapted from the humanities might be deployed to facilitate the "self-redemption" of scientific geography from its constraining positivist closure, perhaps paving the way for its alignment with the open-ended and pluralistic world-view of an emerging critical poststructuralism. Stylistic and methodological attributes of a postmodern attitude permeate the editorial: its postmodern style is a refreshing departure from the usual flat, denotative prose of scientific reporting; the blatant refusal of the authors to marshal validity and reference authority in support of their arguments is a portent of bold, new directions for the discipline's flagship journal; finally, the topic is thought-provoking and timely, motivated in part by the authors' concern about "the absence of a considered debate over the challenges and relative merits of poststructuralism" (Dixon and Jones, 1996,767). The timing of this debate cannot be separated from events and conditions that characterize the postmodern-as-epoch (Dear and Wassmansdorf, 1993). Perhaps that time has already passed: at least one observer suggests that the impact of information technology and time-space convergence on human communication seems to render Dixon and Jones' "considered debate" less relevant in the postmodern epoch (Nemeth, 1997). Postmodern skepticism thrives on information surfeits, and ambiguous truths are bred wholesale by the speed in the span of cyberspace: this new flexibility in the accumulation of information now feeds a frenzy of popular skepticism about absolute truths that is much deeper and darker than the methodological skepticism in positivist science that continues to invest heavily in their credibilities.

I share Dixon and Jones' concern that the debate on critical poststructuralism is long overdue. Certainly their strategy of persuasion begs comment – and not only from the scientific geographers of many stripes to whom it is addressed. The debate would be enriched (if not

edified) by including the voices of relativism in the discussion. Yet, by calling for a "considered" debate, Dixon and Jones are clearly restricting their agenda to exclude relativists. How and why they do so are questions that generate some interesting insights into the alternative futures of human geography, and have implications that are the focus of my comments.

Dixon and Jones demonstrate in their editorial how the critical poststructuralist's method of destabilization-through-deconstruction facilitates freeing the center of scientific geography from its fixed ideas in order to permit "dynamism and unfixity," or what I interpret them to mean to be the play of multiple meanings in geographic discourse. However, Dixon and Jones are against relativism, and therefore intolerant of a degree of pluralism that promotes the mixing of Apollonian (orderly) and Dionysian (celebratory) world views and voices. Excluding relativists from "a considered debate over the challenges and relative merits of poststructuralism" has obvious appeal for both critical poststructuralists and scientific geographers. "Considered debate" by their agreement seems confined to an arena of "mature, deliberative thought." Both critical geographers and scientific geographers characterize themselves as mature deliberative thinkers who care about the weighty matters in which they choose to engage and deliberate. They agree to use language in socially constructive ways to solve problems. They also agree that they have achieved a balance of skepticism and criticism in the service of science that can facilitate the construction of social order and a better world. Thus, to negate methodically is viewed as a positive act within the context of the goals of scientific skepticism (Szymanski and Agnew, 1981, 1).

Yet, as Bearn has pointed out, scientific minds cannot long indulge in unrestricted skeptical and critical thinking without discovering that the way they "word the world" (that is, their social construction of it through language) is true only to the extent that they have already agreed to "share all judgements about what is relevant to what." This is why relativism persists and perseveres as an alternative to scientific thinking, because it is obvious that "all people do not share all judgements about what is relevant to what" (Bearn 1997,x).

The inevitability of making this discovery through an unfettered elaboration of skepticism results in that deeper and darker relativist thinking that has always terrorized rational and scientific thinkers by revealing to them the groundlessness of their linguistic practices. The epigraph by Nietzsche preceding my comments here suggests that the source of this terror resides in a backlash of thinking itself. Relativist thinking is a sort of intuitive echo (from the abyss) that anticipates and

negates everything shouted (hypotheses, assertions, proclamations, etc.). Paraphrasing Bearn (pp. x, xii).

Relativism shows itself in that kind of communicative failure which, when disjoined from weighty matters, incites laughter. Language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations—a thin net over an abyss. Thus, when one considers life as a whole, one reaches the conclusion that nothing is worth saying or doing.

Dixon and Jones as critical poststructuralists define their project in part by choosing to shout anyway. However, geographers may also come to know the merits of their critical poststructuralism, and the challenges to it, by observing the futility of their tactical attempts to set restricted agendas and to otherwise exclude the contingent world of relativist thinking from contaminating their considered thoughts and debates. Since the birth of the sort of moribund scientific geography that Dixon and Jones are critiquing was attended by considered debates that excluded relativists, all that need be said about the merits of a self-redeemed scientific geography, recast in the very same foundry of considered debates and exclusion, is that it seems destined to reproduce the same dead forms.

Dixon and Jones' editorial strategy to mute the disruptive voices of relativism is clearly foreshadowed in Jones' recent *Geographical Analysis* article (coauthored with Robert Q. Hanham) titled "Contingency, Realism and the Expansion Method" (1995). Here, Jones and Hanham posit an alignment between spatial science's expansion method and scientific realism in converging traditions of analytic philosophy. Their attempt at alignment here assumes an agreement between them on the present meaning of the term "contingency": i.e. to denote—not particularity—but "an intervention in a process caused by context-dependent differences within which that process is embedded. Contingencies interrupt the operation of processes, thereby producing different empirical outcomes in different contexts" (1995,186). Jones and Hanham claim that both the expansion method and scientific realism are approaches that "reject all claims of universal determination" and "share a faith in the value of abstraction and analytical investigation" (p. 186–7). They propose their dialogue "in the hopes of enlarging the methodological terrain of human geography" (p. 187). However, their first order of business is to dismiss "contingency as indeterminacy" (relativism?) from their further consideration, because it introduces an "ontology of chance" that is "a weaker and less useful concept than most [scientific geographers] would be interested in purchasing" (p. 188). This phrasing, by the way, introduces the tactical importance of phrases like "intellectual purchase" and "temporary stabilization" into the vocabulary of critical theorists.

They seek to position their own selectively determinate and privileged contingent thinking in intellectual space, and to distance it from those indeterminate contingencies of "excessive" relativist thinking they disdain and dismiss. Unfortunately, by excluding indeterminate contingency from their analysis Jones and Hanham ignore contemplating the very type of contingent thinking most appropriate to survival in a postmodern contingent economy. I suggest that an ontology of chance is an idea appropriate to the times, and worth exploring.

Since Dixon and Jones argue forcefully and directly against excessive relativism ("hyperrelativism") in their editorial, this is where I will focus the majority of my commentary. Indeed, Dixon and Jones might as well have appended "And Against Relativism" to their title, so that readers might fully anticipate the significance and implications of their aggressive stand. In the main, they raise strong logical and moral objections to relativist thinking, but in what amounts to a lopsided discussion that ends with their dismissing relativism without ever having refuted its challenge to the project of critical poststructuralism. However, Bearn (1997, ix) emphasizes that relativism, though it has always seemed easy to refute, has always refused to retire.

As the editorial stands, Dixon and Jones' dismissal of relativism is a transparent attempt to give critical poststructuralism wider appeal among scientific geographers who are also against relativism. However, in their devotion to science, their critical poststructuralism eventually reveals itself to be more like "doing penance" than "doing tolerance." The alignment between critical poststructuralists and scientific geographers is enhanced by advantaging that inner sense of disciplinary solidarity that focuses on a common external enemy—relativism. That enemy goes by many names in the lexicon of scientific culture: "crude relativism," "cynical relativism," "excessive relativism," "hyperrelativism" and—most interesting in the context of what follows—"lazy pluralism." All of these are associated with non-instrumental-rational and lay forms of skepticism, and are glossed as "nihilism."

The editorial thus raises the issue of relativism for a limited and self-serving purpose, and without giving thought to address its potential for shaping an alternative geography that is neither scientific nor poststructural. Furthermore it is odd that Dixon and Jones think it "progressive" ("understood as a politics that promotes unlimited freedom and possibility" [p. 778]) to now indulge in the same sort of politics of exclusion that positivists have been wont to use for decades to end their own unwanted conversations with relativist thinkers. However, a rising tide of popular skepticism that in part characterizes the postmodern epoch seems to be rapidly overwhelming both old and new intellectual

levees built to preserve and privilege enlightenment morality and scientific knowledge. Dixon and Jones' efforts to order debate by excluding relativism also seems futile because (to quote an irrational credo of amoral computer hackers) "information wants to be free."

Dixon and Jones' editorial agrees with the Jones and Hanham article by suggesting that "scientific geography's greatest challenge is the construction of new methodologies appropriate to investigations of a plural and never fixed social world" (Dixon and Jones, 1996,778). To this end, they encourage scientific geographers to abandon their methodological inflexibility and to pursue a progressive alignment with critical poststructuralists. Dixon and Jones attempt to demonstrate through example in their editorial how a deconstructive critical poststructuralism might facilitate scientific geography's emancipation from its positivist closure. Their emancipatory narrative reveals that critical poststructuralists share some of the major philosophical and political enlightenment assumptions already held by scientific geographers. It is these shared values and goals that provide the common ground upon which Dixon and Jones attempt to construct their edifice of persuasion.

Framing Mary and Forgetting Nietzsche

Dixon and Jones offer an allegorical reading of scientific geography that employs the popular Disney film "Mary Poppins" (1964). It is not necessary to view this film to appreciate how the authors deploy their allegorical narrative to critique scientific geography. The allegory interprets a nanny (Mary Poppins) as the film's poststructural character. Mary's employer (the banker George Banks) is scientific geography. Banks' children represent the geographic discipline itself. Mary's friend's Uncle Albert is a "stand-in for a celebratory poststructuralism exemplified in the later Baudrillard" (Dixon and Jones, 1996,774).

The interpretive framework that Dixon and Jones construct around Mary Poppins, George Banks, Albert and other characters in this film allows them to circumvent the extent to which the critical approach they are using to deconstruct scientific geography – though inspired by Jacques Derrida – also derives from the ideas of Nietzsche. Derrida and Baudrillard are the only intellectuals in the poststructural/ postmodern pantheon mentioned in the editorial.

Why do they forget Nietzsche? Because acknowledging him and his ideas would seriously undermine the appeal of the critical poststructural deconstructive method to scientific geographers. Nietzschean nihilism springs from his rejection of enlightenment assumptions; for example, the assumption that reasonable dialog facili-

tates progressive thought and social transformation. A progressive dialog between scientific reason and poststructural reason is made possible insofar as they both claim to share some enlightenment values; for example pluralism and democracy. Specifically, the enlightenment story that attributes the gradual emancipation of humanity from slavery and class oppression to the central role played by the progress of a goal-oriented scientific knowledge away from ignorance is mutually appealing. But, invoking Nietzschean nihilism can be embarrassing in as much as Nietzsche brought about a deconstruction of the story of science that revealed its false enlightenment assumptions and internal contradictions long before Derrida coined the term "deconstruction." Invoking Nietzsche also invokes postmodernism.

In their allegorical narrative, in a subsection titled "Posting Mary", both Mary and Albert are characterized as poststructuralists and not as postmodernists. Nor does the term "postmodern" appear anywhere but once in the editorial (yet it appears as one of six keywords appended to it). What is the difference between critical poststructuralism and postmodernism? This is a question that cannot begin to be answered here, but it helps to identify poststructuralism as "the product of French intellectuals aspiring to a post-Marxian critical approach" (Seidman, 1994,18). One of those French intellectuals is Derrida, the most prominent contemporary deconstructionist. Critical poststructuralism can thus be fairly characterized as Dixon and Jones have presented it – by the Derridian deconstructive technique. Yet nowhere do Dixon and Jones actually define critical poststructuralism in their editorial; only to imply in the negative sense that *their* critical poststructuralism is *not* postmodernism.

However, Nietzschean nihilism is also associated with postmodernism in academic discourse. This is because, as Seidman points out, poststructuralism is but one point of departure in postmodern human studies. This being so, then Baudrillard's "celebratory poststructuralism" deprecated by Dixon and Jones (p. 774) is but another postmodern point of departure. Critical poststructuralism and postmodernism may or may not be related to each other as descended from the family of ambiguous, atheoretical, relativist ideas and methods hatched from Nietzschean nihilism. For example, contemporary relativist youth thinking and the behavior it generates may arise from epochal postmodern conditions apart from any Nietzschean intellectual wellsprings (though they may also be nurtured by these wellsprings). Bearn (1997, xv), for example, suggests that Nietzsche's philosophy need not be interpreted "as exacerbating the nihilism of contemporary culture." The anti-intellectual strain of contemporary youth nihilism and relativism might then be traced to a different source—the influence of

prevailing amoral market forces. I will return to the topic of youth relativism and its implications shortly.

Dixon and Jones claim that critical poststructuralism offers scientific geographers an opportunity for self-redemption through pluralistic thinking. At the same time they offer assurances that in aligning with critical poststructuralists, the enlightenment values of scientific geographers can remain secure against immoral and amoral relativist thinking. This is an ironic proposal in the sense that irony gives with one hand while taking away with the other. Critical poststructuralists cannot give with both hands here because pluralism is a euphemism for a degree of relativism that inadvertently blazes trails to more extreme dissensus thinking. Paths of relativism that tend to lead away from consensus thinking toward dissensus thinking can also arrive at indifference to thinking. In this way scientific geography becomes more than just a pluralistic science when it aligns with critical poststructuralism (becomes *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*). Its world view cannot but become less objective and more ethereal, less rational and more relative, less moral and more amoral.

Dixon and Jones' antiessentialist reading of scientific geography ends up revealing that critical poststructuralism shares much more common ground with scientific geography than these authors might care to admit. While their critique of the entrenched positivist philosophy in scientific geography has merit for potentially opening up the discipline to plural methodologies (in addition to the scientific method), the position of critical poststructuralism relative to scientific geography smacks more of compromise than of challenge. Dixon and Jones' proposal for facilitating the self-redemption of and alignment with scientific geography again reminds me of those amoral or morally indifferent computer hackers who claim to strengthen the corporate entities they attack, but who end up becoming part of those entities. Rather than move geography from a causal to a casual science, Dixon and Jones' proposal on behalf of a methodological and moral pluralism simply substitutes one exclusionary disciplinary regimen for another. What geographers do not need tied around their necks in a postmodern epoch where relativism and amorality proliferate is a maladaptive new scientific albatross to replace an old one.

Dixon and Jones' critical poststructuralism ends up looking a lot like the left-liberal persuasion of the American neopragmatist Richard Rorty, who argues that "thought can only be justified in the realm of action" (in Linn 1996, 42-43). Like Dixon and Jones, Rorty is skeptical of the positivist's progressive search for objective truths, but acts to preserve some enlightenment values; for example, remaining obligated to

emancipation through some kind of programmatic action. Dixon and Jones' realm of action emancipates through the progressive politics of "edifying conversations." They believe that "considered debates," for example between scientific geographers and critical poststructuralists, can nurture unlimited freedom and possibility (particularly in Western liberal democratic societies). And, they act in both subtle and overt ways to exclude relativism from their considered debates. Technically, the spirit of an edifying conversation as a way of "keeping the conversation going" is not violated in an exclusive considered debate. On the other hand, an exclusive considered debate can be an unconscionable tyranny of democracy when it trammels individualism in order to promote its program of consensus action in a social world.

Flaming Baudrillard:

To demonstrate this, I will focus more closely here on Dixon and Jones' treatment of Uncle Albert as the key point in their allegory where they try to clean up the unruly grammatical structure in critical poststructuralism that they have inherited from Nietzsche, but which embarrasses them. That point is where Albert is identified first as a "nihilistic poststructuralism that refuses any and all decisionism under the banner of hyperrelativism," and then as a "celebratory poststructuralism exemplified in the later Baudrillard ... [that] does not engage, but only cavorts in space" (Dixon and Jones, 1996,774).

Dixon and Jones feel obligated to condemn Albert as strongly as they valorize Mary because he: "refuses the prerogative of designation, and in doing so relinquishes the responsibility for evaluation, a responsibility that we see as crucial in the construction of a critical poststructuralism. Mary on the other hand, accepts the prerogative of designation, but is always cognizant of the *context* of designation" (p. 774).

Albert is condemned because he is not rational or near "normal" enough to moralize, judge and act. According to Dixon and Jones, Albert "exists in liminal analytic space, cognizant of the complete arbitrariness of the links between people and place, but refuses to take measure of both the processes that fix social space's meanings and practices and the means by which they might be reworked" (p. 774).

Albert thinks, but then he waves about "the banner of hyperrelativism" and acts irresponsibly. But why do poststructuralists want to so abruptly dismiss Albert rather than engage him?

What Dixon and Jones, as Mary, do to Albert by deprecating his

“giddy irresponsibility” then dismissing him is a good example of what critical theorists influenced by the ideas of Michel Foucault call “a monologue of reason on madness.” Dixon and Jones (Mary) have no intention of engaging Albert (Baudrillard) in a dialog between their reason and his unreason. They are only interested in engaging Banks (scientific geography) in a dialog between reason and reason. But this is no dialog at all. It is just the asserting of a positivist consensus. Dixon and Jones in their righteous passion find it reasonable to exclude relativists from their considered debate as a means of ensuring that all the participants understand one another. In this sense, it resembles the more philosophical post-Marxian project of “communicative action” advanced by Jurgen Habermas.

Thus Dixon and Jones condemn Albert’s narrative of madness, chance and discontinuity in their own narrative prescribing reason, order and continuity. The answer to why Albert is dismissed and not engaged exposes the ironic destiny of critical poststructuralism itself in extreme relativism, which Dixon and Jones do not want to contemplate. Albert as Baudrillard is condemned for pushing poststructuralism “to its logical, nihilistic conclusion.” (Dickens and Fontana 1994,12–13). For Baudrillard, even the concept of the social is nowadays obsolete: “The disturbing consequence of Baudrillard’s nihilistic diagnosis is that life in postmodern society is one of survival among the ruins” (Dickens and Fontana 1994, 9). This death of the social renders as futile any aspirations to a viable post-Marxian critical approach, as well as other intellectual projects of meaningful social inquiry. Suddenly the survival of social scientists and intellectuals among the ruins is at stake: there are no safe zones, no ivory towers. Who will choose to remain in the realm of reason? Who will choose to explore the roads leading toward madness?

Thus, Baudrillard beckons poststructuralism to follow him far beyond the site where Dixon and Jones want to stake out their intellectual purchase; beyond where they can employ deconstruction toward social inquiry in a world that still has meaning; beyond the viewpoint of tentative relativism where they can “search for a nonrepresentational theory of judgement that still finds a place for social and political critique” (Dickens and Fontana 1994,12–13). Baudrillard as Albert represents “an interminably open-ended deconstructivist approach to reading texts, celebrating the playful, Dionysian impulse in Nietzschean thought” (Dickens and Fontana 1994,16). Dixon and Jones are sterner Apollonian moralists who are outraged by Baudrillard’s Dionysian impulse (Albert’s “celebratory poststructuralism”). They seek temporary stabilization in a safer relativity that permits a more rigorous way of deconstructing texts that identifies a plural, but limited number of interpretations.

Dixon and Jones' allegorical narrative is limiting and exclusionary in another way. It intentionally distorts Albert's character in order to valorize Mary's contribution to the redemption of Banks. Their reading totally ignores Albert's major contribution to the redemption of Banks. Albert is trotted out as a flawed minor character instead of a protagonist in the Dixon and Jones narrative. Yet it is Albert's Baudrillard, not Banks' scientific geography, that provides an alternative to Mary's critical poststructuralism in the excluded narrative. And, those who have seen the film surely recall that it is his unintentional retelling of Albert's silly joke, and not Mary's machinations, that ultimately saves Banks' assets.

I have suggested that deconstructive critical poststructuralism is not very far removed from positivist scientific geography in their shared antipathy for Nietzschean nihilism. However, "Once criticism enters the labyrinth of deconstruction it is committed to a sceptical epistemology that leads back to Nietzsche ..." (Norris, in Sarup 1989, 61). In their allegory, Dixon and Jones, as Mary, encounter Nietzschean nihilism in Albert: "Mary finds him bouncing off the ceiling, unable to control his infectious laughter" (p. 774). Mary deigns not to engage Albert in meaningful dialogue because he "cavorts in space" and speaks in ambiguities, absurdities and paroxysms of laughter. We recall here Bearn's (1997,x) observation that "relativism shows itself in that kind of communicative failure which, when disjoined from weighty matters, incites laughter."

It is at this point in the allegorical narrative that the ironic predicament of critical poststructuralism reveals itself. Dixon and Jones are reaching out to scientific geography for stability because their own strategic relativism (moral pluralism) is insecure. The more they think, the more they know they are slipping away toward moral relativism and moral indifference. Critical poststructuralism is exposed as a self-deleting intellectual purchase or temporary stabilization that allows its adherents to intellectualize in a chaotic world and still to sleep at night, content that their thoughts "are justified in the realm of action." Otherwise their thoughts unwinding would send them tumbling toward the extreme relativism they fear and abhor.

Moral Pluralism, Moral Relativism, and Moral Indifference

This is a convenient juncture to elaborate further on the differences between moral pluralism, moral relativism and moral indifference. Scientific geographers and critical poststructuralists might be characterized alike as functional moralists, at least to the extent they still choose to believe in the enlightenment assumption that moral issues

are open to rational deliberations (cf. Dixon and Jones' considered debates) that are useful in safeguarding the real interests of the people, and persist to pursue these deliberations under present conditions of late capitalism. While Dixon and Jones have never defined their critical poststructuralism, it appears to promote both functional moralism and a moral pluralism, and its analytical method appears part deconstructive and part rational-choice Marxism. Again, Dixon and Jones more clearly delineate what critical poststructuralism is not, *e.g.*, It is not morally relativist or morally indifferent.

Moral relativists are skeptical of functional and moral pluralism because the outcome of rational deliberations include unacceptable amounts of human (and environmental) distress and harm. They point out that scientific geographers and critical poststructuralists accept only as an act of faith that they can systematically heal and redeem a world that is rapidly becoming exhausted by the amorality of the marketplace: *e.g.*, "all the primary relationships in our society, those between employers and employees, between lawyers and clients, between doctors and patients, between universities and students are being stripped of any moral understanding other than that of market exchange" (Bellah 1997,24). In recognition of this trend, moral relativists are particularly skeptical about the continuing relevance of rational deliberations for adapting peoples around the world to the amorality of societies shaped by the contingent economy of late capitalism.

Relativist skepticism is disparaged as nihilism and cynicism, but it does not do nothing. Moral relativism and even moral indifference are not just nihilism and cynicism if they also generate insights about possible adaptations for human survival "among the ruins" of the amoral marketplace. Moral relativism and moral indifference can be characterized by their deeper, darker skepticism (Gothic as much as cynic) that spontaneously arises from within an anti-intellectual urban culture of the postmodern epoch that unintentionally redeems the world by adapting people, and particularly young people, to the amorality of the global marketplace. By dismissing the challenge of relativist thinking to critical poststructuralism and by excluding the voices of relativism from its considered debates, Dixon and Jones miss the opportunity to recognize and reflect on the active role that anti-intellectualism plays in the reconstruction of contemporary society. Critical poststructuralism as an intellectual endeavor seems out-of-touch with the advent of a relativist youth culture that entices all sorts of amoral behavior in homes, streets and classrooms, and increasingly alarms adult rational thinkers. In most private space, and increasingly in public space, reckless regard for the Truth is illegal. Geographers need to appreciate the extent to which contemporary youths, acting out their moral relativity and indifference,

are agents of social change that do make a difference whether or not they reflect on their actions, intellectualize and rationalize about them, or are rewarded or punished for them. The problem with construing "postmodernism" as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" is that it inappropriately invents a logical integrity for connecting thought with action through rational choice. However, relativist agency in the culture of late capitalism may have neither a logical integrity nor any rationality.

The relativist thinking of contemporary youth is not just a province of the poor and uneducated. Nor is it necessarily a social problem insofar as it adapts people to survival in an amoral marketplace by opening up opportunities for them that arise from its own indeterminate contingencies. Youth relativism is today a major force of social change in popular culture that is spreading rapidly throughout mainstream society. It cuts across class boundaries and manifests itself in school as the detached rudeness of the relativist ("dysrational") student who challenges received knowledge, disobeys the rules of reasoned dialog, and refuses to sit still in the shadow of a lectern (Sacks 1996). Rational thinkers often grouse that such students have learning disorders and seek to marginalize them. "Dysrationalia," for example, is a recently discovered learning disorder defined as "the inability to think rationally" (Lewin 1996). "Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) has been pandemic among American students for over a decade, and is being increasingly diagnosed among adult learners. On the other side of the lectern are many elitist, arrogant and hypocritical professors who claim that "students are students because they don't know what they don't know," and that "bad things happen when young people lack the discipline to sit still in a room."

Geographers who address the challenge of popular youth relativism cannot avoid being drawn into some broader conversations that bear on teaching, research, service and the future of their discipline. These conversations range from the role of moral education in the schools to the rapid erosion of intellectualism in a global marketplace. Geographers who accept the challenge of moral relativism and moral indifference might even begin to learn and indulge in relativist survival stratagems.

Toward a Critical Relativism and an Extreme Geography:

Philosophers of science who are scientists themselves—Paul Feyerabend, for example—have argued that positivist science is a strong argument (explanation) supported by a weak argument (belief). The positivist cloak of unimpeachable science on closer inspection does seem rent with untenable assumptions, omissions, internal contradictions, errors, misconduct and prevarications. Public exposure of the limits of

positivism has helped revitalize relativism.

There has been a lot of talk of late about a *swing* toward a revitalized relativism in geography. Critical poststructuralism both exemplifies this movement as critique and reveals its limitations as challenge. Dixon and Jones' swing toward relativism traces a narrow arc. They promote a moral and methodological pluralism that by design fails to extend to the positions of moral relativism and moral indifference. The deconstruction of Dixon and Jones' allegorical narrative exposes the internal contradiction of their relativist/anti-relativist position. By valorizing Mary and disparaging Albert, they construe their relativism as moral pluralism in order to accommodate and appeal to those scientific geographers who still embrace the major tenets of a positivist epistemology. For example, Dixon and Jones ask scientific geographers to explore and debate the merits of moral and methodological pluralism, which might facilitate their "redemption," i.e., lead them to reconsider and reject the claim to *universality* in their positivist epistemology. Yet, Dixon and Jones do not challenge or dispute that aspect of the claim to *autonomy* in positivist epistemology that encourages scientific geographers to build and maintain discursive and institutional walls in their discipline to exclude relativist thinking. That Dixon and Jones seek to reinforce rather than remove these walls of exclusion against the free exchange of information seems inconsistent with what appears to be their sincere commitment to moral and methodological pluralism. Thus, the critical poststructuralist swing to a revitalized relativism in geography is hardly disruptive to the continuity of the hegemony of scientific thinking in the discipline. The term "swing" implies only that there is a motion (a movement within scientific geography) that is tethered and secured, and moves in an instrumental, measured, mechanical way; pendulum-like, and predictably back and forth. So how are contemporary human geographers riding this pendulum ever to break through the exclusionary wall of considered debate and explore the alternative worlds of moral relativism and indifference? A considered debate among scientific geographers is not an open forum. It accepts any critique that does not challenge or disrupt its proclivities to exclude relativism and ensure its eternal return to the same positivist closure. Its informed debate is democratic only in the sense of majority (scientific) rule. The individual, idiosyncratic, disorderly voice of relativism is ruled out. However, perhaps that exclusionary wall can be breached by sneaking a disruptive notion like "critical relativism" into that debate.

Critical Relativism as a Trojan Horse

Anyone who respects the power of language to construct knowledge can also appreciate the power of language to disrupt knowledge.

Semantic games are a Trojan horse that can break down the walls of positivist closure. The notion of critical relativism provides a way of talking about the merits of critical poststructuralism that dissolves the agenda of Dixon and Jones' considered debate. Beyond that, critical relativism encourages speculation on the advent of an "extreme geography" as more appropriate than normal (scientific) geography for exploring postmodern conditions of time-space compression. The notion of a critical relativism takes shape as we look more closely at the term "critical" used by scientific geographers and critical poststructuralists, and what it signifies.

One way that the gatekeepers of scientific knowledge have managed to safeguard its aura of transcendence for so long is that they have privileged the positivist language game of denotation (Bertens, 1995,125). Consider for example the limits set by the privileged discourse among positivists that reduces "critical thinking" to "thinking science." This discourse is restricted because in the language game of denotation "critical" signifies, according to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1975,270), "exercising or involving careful judgement or judicious evaluation". The limitations set by the consensus denotation for "critical" also carry over to facilitate a reasonable dialog between critical poststructuralists and scientific geographers. Thus Dixon and Jones rely on "responsibility for evaluation" as a moral persuasion that complements their moral pluralism and facilitates the alignment between scientific geographers and critical poststructuralists.

However, under conditions of global time-space compression (accelerated and infinitized, in part, by the speed and span of cyberspace) there seems to be no longer adequate time nor secure space left for anyone, including geographers, to "exercise careful judgement" and to contemplate logical choices. The denoted significance of "critical" applied to critical thinking therefore seems maladaptive for human survival under urgent conditions that prevail in the postmodern epoch.

If denotation in language is used to construct knowledge by consensus leading to positivist closure, then connotation in language represents the potential for dissensus voices to construct alternative knowledges and an inclusive pluralistic society. Jones is aware of this potential, having recently discussed hegemonic narrative and dictionary definition with regard to the modifier "certain" and the residue of imprecision in one of its connotations (Natter and Jones 1997 ,153-154). This example of "critical" resonates in telling ways to his (and Natter's) example of "certain." If Dixon and Jones were to contemplate what might be a more adaptive and appropriate connotation for 'critical', given uncertain conditions of post-modernity, they might begin to appreciate

the social, political and economic implications of "critical" becoming more widely understood to signify one of its dictionary connotations: "that which is characterized by risk and uncertainty." Yet to do so would render critical poststructuralism of ambiguous value in the postmodern epoch, by revealing the futility of the responsibility for evaluation in situations of uncertainty. Werlen (1993,114) helps us understand here why Albert's irrational laughter is his judgement:

In a situation where there is a 'decision in the face of uncertainty', the agent is not even aware of the probable consequences of the various alternatives. In that case even the evaluation cannot be indicated: perhaps one should be pessimistic, perhaps optimistic. The evaluation is neutral.

What does Albert know that Mary doesn't, that he expresses as laughter? Perhaps he knows that any considered debate whose goal is political action in a social world requires a "certain" frame of reference that outside the game of denotation dissolves in the face of everyday uncertainties. Perhaps he knows that Werlen's last sentence reads like a judgement from the cryptic *I Ching* whose images are an ontology of chance. Perhaps Albert finds it laughable that—in an age of increasing uncertainty—the neutral evaluation of indifference becomes appropriate to everything.

Grassroots philosopher Yogi Berra recently recommended "When you come to a fork in the road, take it". Some will say that Yogi has misspoke himself, yet I think his words open up a gateway to postmodern thinking by breaching the walls of positivist closure. Yogi is an apostle of critical relativism insofar as he offers pioneering and sage advice for adapting and surviving under postmodern conditions of risk and uncertainty. What is critical about critical relativism? It all depends on what "critical" is understood to signify. The ambiguity of connotation can displace the certainties of denotation by dissolving the exclusionary rules of its language game. Connotation allows more players in the language game, expanding the conversation.

Anti-relativist critical poststructuralists play by the strict rules of a denotation game that penalizes semantics—the exploitation of connotation and ambiguity—for greasing the slippery slope toward relativism. Their intellectual purchase prevents them from using old words like "critical" in new ways that might undermine the precision and agreement required for their considered debates. If Dixon and Jones can appreciate the power of neologisms and ambiguous meanings (*e.g.*, in connotations) to entice social change, which they appear to do when they invoke the word "*supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*," then they should be able

to tolerate critical relativism as a challenge to their critical poststructuralism. If critical poststructuralists were ever to engage a critical relativist with the telling question "What does it mean to be critical?"; the conversation would dissolve into semantics.

Once "critical" becomes introduced into the geographic conversation to signify "characterized by risk and uncertainty," the players can begin to advantage its complementarity to relativism. Geographers who feel constrained by the denotation game of positivist closure and enticed down the paths of critical relativism may begin to explore the possibilities of an "extreme geography."

Just Do It

Extreme geography, as a transmogrification of scientific geography, is appropriate and complementary to critical relativist thinking. Its method is madness, thus fitting for critical relativist explorations. Extreme geography offers a more radical, risky and uncertain departure from the hegemonies of scientific geography than that offered by the moral and methodological pluralism of Dixon and Jones' critical poststructuralism. Extreme geography gambles that there may be no pendulum swing back to a normal scientific geography. It finds attractive the notion of a "postmodern abyss" and a terrific exploratory descent into its depthless relativity. It invites in the place of scientific method a kind of reckless and uncontrolled plunge into uncertain territory, with no expectations of gain, and no guarantee of return.

Contrast a postmodern extreme geography, as characterized by its risk-taking and desire, to a modern normal geography that is a rational science characterized in large part as the work of agreed-upon methods of accumulating data. Critical relativism awakens the possibility of more geographers experimenting and experiencing as a freewheeling community of artists do: *e.g.*, just doing, without agreeing in their methods or moralities; for in morality, as in art, one idea seems as good as another. Whereas Dixon and Jones rationalize and moralize for a progressive scientific geography that claims to reserve judgement but is against relativism, I question the obvious limitations and internal contradictions in their project. I speak up instead for an extreme geography that can abandon judgement and accept and adapt to conditions of moral relativism that already permeate contemporary society – a geography which arises from uncertain wellsprings; that is, the wellsprings of uncertainty.

I envision extreme geographers acting on impulse to merge with contemporary youth culture's amorality and indifference, by delving

into the mysteries that incite it. To do so merges epistemology with attitude, whereupon moral pluralism becomes unmasked as moral relativism. Dixon and Jones working definition for "progressive" as "understood as a politics that promotes unlimited freedom and possibility" (p. 778) can be then be applied to "progressive music" like amoral urban funk which has been described as "an amalgam of rhythm and sex, dancing and insubordination, knowledge and fun – [and is all] about jettisoning the Puritan ethic" (quoted in Keirsey 1996b,56).

Some young geographers have already initiated a powerful discourse on the urgencies and imperatives of youth culture in the context of postmodern geographies (Norwine, et al, 1997; Ruddick, 1997). While these geographers are not critical relativists or extreme geographers, their scientific researches do begin to tease out the implications of the dynamic power in youth relativism that forces social change. One way of doing extreme geography is a risky information-retrieval technique like "dumpster diving." Youthful computer hackers have used this technique to expose and exploit security flaws in protected electronic information domains. Extreme geographers might similarly reconstitute as knowledge selections from various depositories of elided information (e.g., from trashbins, audio and visual taped recordings, the Internet and the like) –discarded narratives that can tell, for example, unheard-of stories about places. The result might be crafted into a speculative spatial imaginary that takes the shape of a spectacular pastiche – like "The Watergate." Through its telling and retelling as urban myth, the story that is important is no longer important because it is true, but because it belongs to everyone. Today, in the Age of Information surfeit, anyone who "surfs" the Internet is doing dumpster diving and engaging in participatory storytelling. Dumpster diving on the Internet is also a way of doing extreme geography that can help disrupt some of scientific geography's glorified disciplinary myths about Theory, Method, Pure Research and Intellectual Property. Consider, for example, the damage that Internet-bred conspiracy theories are now doing to Theory across the disciplines as an intellectual enterprise. The death of Theory is inseparable from the death of The Intellectual in the postmodern epoch. The result of information "wanting to be free" is that, to the extent that it becomes free, everybody–whether or not they intellectualize–becomes an expert witness. The voices of relativism all have something important to say, even if it is not edifying, and even if the speakers are nobodies.

Extreme geographers can also salvage parts of old scientific methodologies to facilitate renewed explorations of familiar territory. For example, Keirsey (1996a; 1996b) has reinvented patriarchal fieldwork as a feminist field experience. Her experiments in "just doing geography" in Ireland opened up many unanticipated and enriching field experi-

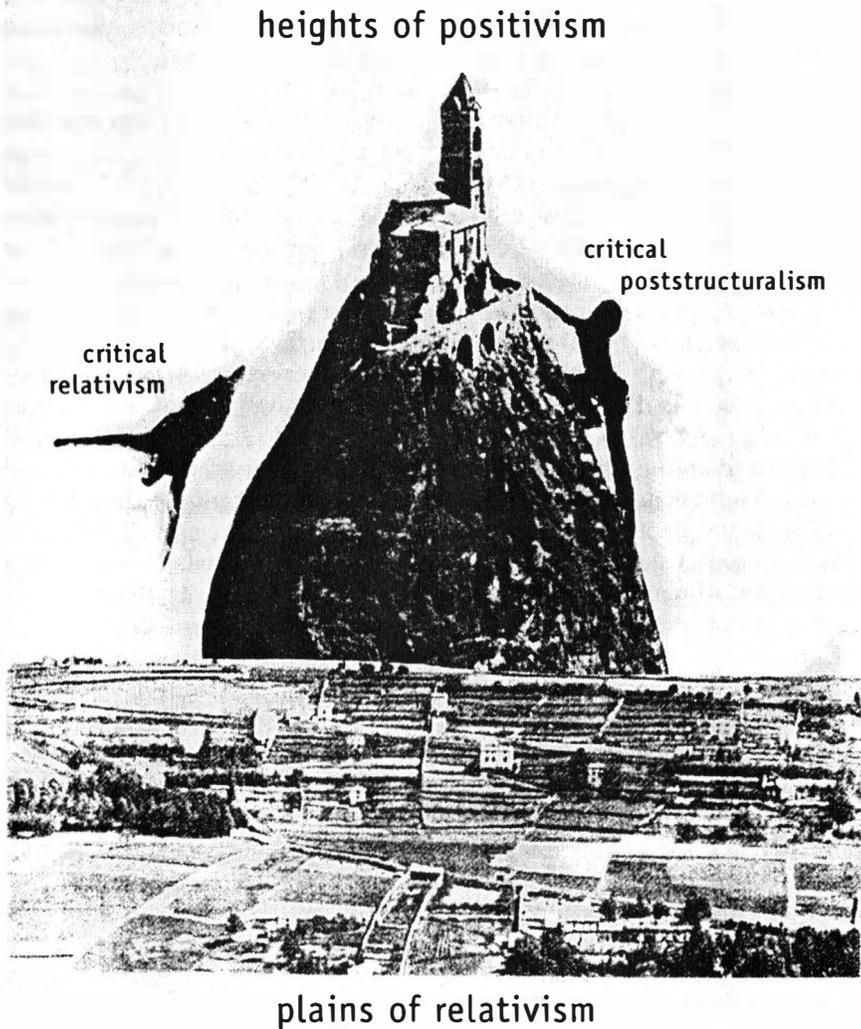


FIGURE 1. The Fortress and the Plain

ences that traditional (i.e. patriarchal) field work might have denied her. Meanwhile, she was able to identify a number of gateways to postmodern (critical relativist) thinking in the Irish landscape that appeared to have adaptive use and helped her survive and enjoy her field experience. Her guides to these gateways were postmodern platitudes appropriate to her postmodern attitudes. These included: "Put to the question all basic assumptions;" "Cross boundaries without a license;" "Present the unrepresentable;" "Never complain, never explain;" and "Expect the worst, hope for the best." She also allowed her movements to be guided by an ontology of chance, and whenever she came to a fork in the road, she took it. In other words, Keirse's geography was extreme because she had to abandon the heights of positivism to explore the plains of relativism.

I have thus far speculated on postmodern extreme geography in terms of its epochal and methodological characteristics, but these are inseparable from postmodernism as style. In matters of postmodern style, extreme geographers might mimic television's role in creating a common language style and storybook approach that appeals to diverse tastes in a global society. For example, consider the medieval chronicler's style of America's traveling television correspondent Charles Kuralt which, paraphrasing Sexton (1997), consists of a blending of pictures and words that illuminate the country in a remarkable way. There are probably no lessons in any of his reports. Kuralt puts the simplest thing under his microscope, and it becomes something beautiful, hopeful, encouraging. All he wants is stories, the wilder the better. His method is humbly inquisitive and idiosyncratically investigative. He has a nose for ignored worth. As a result, he produces big-hearted essays on topics others think tiny. He demonstrates the skill of meaningful, everyday observation. His televised chronicles are more about telling stories than they are about showing pictures.

The Fortress and the Plain

Figure 1 is a metaphorical device that conveys key ideas from this commentary. The mountain fortress of logical positivism is where scientific geography resides, claiming the high moral ground. The horizon of the entire surrounding epistemological landscape constitutes the normal curve, symbolizing the achievement of positivist science's hegemonic quest to universalize and generalize. From its privileged and lofty perspective, positivism presents itself to the world as the single source of scientific truth, the only reliable source of ultimate explanation and the best hope for human happiness. Positivism surveilles all the objects and relationships in a world it observes, names, knows as its unified domain, and attempts to describe in a lucid, straightforward

manner. But there is more to language than lucidity. Below, and overshadowed, are the ludic slopes and plains of relativism, where dwell the contextualized, the situated, the localized, and the marginalized truths. Upon these playing fields there are no rules and nothing is alien to geographical investigation from the nomadic perspective of critical relativism. There is no obligation to work, only a desire to experience. The critical poststructuralist position is depicted as exploratory, yet it clings to the same towering outcrop of enlightenment bedrock that secures the positivist position. Critical poststructuralism is a tentative intellectual purchase, or temporary stabilization, between the heights of positivism and the plains of relativism. Its tethered position is no extreme departure from positivist science. In contrast, the critical relativist departure from the positivist stronghold is a flamboyant free fall that invites risky and uncertain exploratory experiences, and perhaps grave outcomes.

Rattle and Hum:

Readers could have easily anticipated from the title of their editorial ("For a... Scientific Geography") that the persuasive gesture that Dixon and Jones would be making to scientific geography was going to be more "come-hither" than "fungu!" This in contrast to, say, the defiant critiques of realism and feminism. Dixon and Jones deploy an elaborate, playful and unthreatening deconstructionist technique that gives the iron cage of the geographic discipline's scientific tradition a little rattle while humming out a few of its favorite enlightenment tunes. They have no intent to destroy the cage or dissolve the tradition. Deconstruction is not destruction. Perhaps this is why Dixon and Jones' critical poststructuralism merits the attention of scientific geographers, but amounts to a critique shy of challenge. Let's move on to critical relativism and a more extreme geography.

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