

On the 'con's in Deconstruction

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Few commentators are neutral about deconstruction. Most critics of this method and political practice point to, first, its perceived reluctance to engage in traditional forms of social explanation, and, second, its presumed failure to posit valuative criteria that might guide political action. These are thought to stem from deconstruction's skepticism over the certainty of representation and its concomitant refusal to systematize the identification and hierarchicalization of social power relations. All have led commentators to assume that deconstructivists are agnostic with respect to the production of meaning, the presence of inequalities, and the taking of moral and ethical positions. As a result, deconstruction has been dismissed as a facile, self-nullifying commentary – one characterized by "mere" rhetoric, narcissistic reflection, and inert nihilism. In short, for these critics, deconstruction is a con.

Given this widely held view, we expected that some readers of our editorial, "For a *Supercalifragilisticxpialidocious* Scientific Geography," (Dixon and Jones, 1996), would have found fertile ground for dismissing as pointless satire our attempt at a deconstructivist reading of scientific geography. Eschewing a more traditional, paradigmatic, reading of a discipline beset by incommensurate "isms," we sketched a *field* of geographic knowledge relationally linked through a dialectic of social power and epistemological categories. Adopting a co-constitutive model of the production of knowledge, one in which all categories of thought are defined – however contingently – through their opposite, we emphasized the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate realms of geographic thought. In this view, poststructuralism and scientific geography are bound together by virtue of their relationally – and socio-historically – determined incorporation and repudiation of epistemological categories. In an effort to undermine the apparent closure of these bodies of thought, we relied upon allegory, a method that invokes an infinite translation of elements within narratives in a way that renders as arbitrary their stabilizations. Specifically, we drew an allegorical connection between poststructuralism and scientific geography through Walt Disney's film version of *Mary Poppins* (1964), with the two key protagonists, the banker-patriarch George Banks and the nanny, Mary Poppins, read against scientific geography and poststructuralism, respectively. In the film, Banks comes to reflect on the contingencies and outcomes of

his "grid epistemology," while the juxtaposition of narrative elements in *Mary Poppins* and the discipline of geography prompted us to consider the possibilities of an antiessentialist scientific geography. What, we asked, would a "progressive" scientific geography look like and do? It is this allegorical approach, and in particular our reading of a popular and playful children's film alongside important disciplinary debates, which led us to expect that some readers would find our editorial to be both irreverent and irrelevant.

In "Extreme Geography," however, David Nemeth offers a critique of our essay that differs considerably from the more dismissive line of thought sketched above. For, rather than argue that our deconstruction has gone *too far*, Nemeth charges that it has not gone *far enough*. In particular, he develops the position that our poststructuralist stance, and our method of exposition, is insufficiently removed from the very tenets of science our analysis endeavors to deconstruct. Nemeth accuses us of tethering critical poststructuralism to positivism by appealing to a third, mutually disagreeable, form of analysis, that of critical relativism. He thereby finds fault with our call for a "considered debate" over the relative merits of critical poststructuralism, for the terms of such a debate have been constructed without due consideration of the merits of the excluded party – critical relativists. Ensnared in the trappings of modernist thought, both scientific geography and critical poststructuralism look down from the common vantage point of epistemological certitude (see his Figure 1, p. 28). Unwilling to either topple the peaks or dig up the foundations of positivism, critical poststructuralists are argued to purchase only a temporary stabilization "between the heights of positivism and the plains of relativism" (p. 30). In the face of the postmodern conditions wrought by late capitalism, Nemeth advocates a form of relativism underpinned by a particular kind of nihilism, one committed to neutrality in the face of evaluative judgements and decisionism. Nemeth's critical relativist – a figure whose lineage extends from Nietzsche to Baudrillard, and who is metaphorically depicted as the cavorting Uncle Albert in *Mary Poppins* – admits no rules or obligations. Instead, he engages in "a flamboyant free fall" (his Figure 1), inviting not only "risky and uncertain exploratory experiences," but also, perhaps, "grave outcomes" (p. 30).

Nemeth's essay thus points to another, quite different, "con" in deconstruction. This is not the con job that many have claimed has hoodwinked a generation (a rapidly aging cohort?) of unsuspecting social and cultural geographers, but the surplus of letters that keeps "deconstruction" from being "destruction." Nemeth claims that destruction is a more appropriate critical position for these times, and that only critical relativism is capable of extricating the "con" in deconstruction.

As a more "extreme" geography than our Derridian-inspired version of deconstruction, which Nemeth views as non-threatening (a "critique shy of challenge"), critical relativism sublimates, rather than debates, positivism. As Nemeth sums up what is at stake: "Deconstruction is not destruction" (p. 30).

For us, Nemeth's "Extreme Geography" is a welcome and thought-provoking contribution. In pointing to some aspects of youth culture as exemplary of critical relativism in practice, he initiates a concrete research agenda aimed at overcoming the seemingly ever-present divide between thought and action in critical scholarship. And, more significantly, he demonstrates that, however shopworn modernism and postmodernism might appear to some, their character is integral to an understanding of what it means to *be* "critical." It is this latter point we wish to address in our response to his essay, for on this appears to us to hinge our different approaches to epistemological analysis. Before we proceed, however, we offer a point of clarification. Nemeth is correct that we avoided the term "postmodernism" in our editorial. That we chose instead the term "poststructuralism," bespeaks the fact that postmodernism has become so much of a "free floating signifier" that it cannot provide even a temporarily stabilized meaning without being buttressed by a considerable number of authoritative character references. This was a tack that, unlike Nemeth, we chose to avoid.

In lieu of our reluctance to engage directly postmodernism, we distinguished between two forms of poststructuralism, one designated as "critical," the other as "celebratory." Both undermine the certitude of scientific geography by claiming that ontology is "always already" an outcome of epistemology. But, in asking *how* and *with what effect* ontological presuppositions become framed within bodies of thought such as scientific geography, critical poststructuralism finds a productive moment in deconstructing the social relations of power that fix objects, events, and meanings as self-evident, natural, and enduring. By contrast, celebratory poststructuralism, though equally attuned to the indeterminate character of meaning, is marked by a refusal to ask either how meaning is produced, or with what effect. Thus, though Mary Poppins and Uncle Albert are relatives at the epistemological level, the latter: "exists in a liminal analytic space, cognizant of the complete arbitrariness of the links between people and place, but refusing to take measure of the processes that fix social space's meanings and [the] practices by which they might be reworked" (Dixon and Jones 1996: 774). For these reasons, we found Mary Poppins to be a more useful vehicle for deconstructing a body of thought such as scientific geography.

This leads us, then, to assert the “con” in deconstruction, by which we mean a procedure for identifying what processes have defined centers and peripheries (e.g., objective/subjective, material/ideological, real/fantastic) as given and timeless, and who stands to gain from such stabilizations. This procedure, in turn, can lead to practices that subvert not only the hierarchies in question, but also the social powers that seal their borders. In challenging the effrontery of centers, deconstruction taps the always-existing power within marginality by disclosing the trace of the periphery within the center. In this view, deconstruction refuses an either/or understanding of epistemology, positing instead a field of binaries related through their mutually determined character. “Con,” in this sense of the word, recognizes the mutually *constitutive* (formative), *concurrent* (intersecting), *conjoined* (overlapped), and *contrapuntal* (interwoven) relations among seemingly opposed bodies of thought.

These relations suggest that “scientific geography incorporates via exclusion even those Others its practitioners manifestly reject” (and *vice-versa*; Dixon and Jones 1996: 768). Accordingly, poststructuralists, scientific geographers, and critical relativists, have no recourse other than engagement (or “considered debate”), for any other position reinforces “not only the hubris of self-actualization that lurks within scientific geography, but also its essentialization by its critics” (Dixon and Jones 1996: 768). Contrast this with Nemeth’s critical relativism, which *attempts* to assert a free floating, disconnected epistemology – a “post-modernism” whose prefix can, somehow, make sense after having left behind the suffix.

We emphasize “attempts” in the above sentence to signal that Nemeth is himself unable to write without invoking the very modernism he wants to leave behind. In particular, his essay is replete with the trappings of structuralist thought. He invokes the postmodern economy as the *determinate* of, and the *rationale* for, the critical relativism of youth culture. He consistently draws upon metaphors that rely on the fixed placement of constitutive elements. He posits a spectrum of positivism, critical poststructuralism, and critical relativism, inviting us on a slippery slope that, through a teleology uncharacteristic of relativist uncertainty, ultimately leads to his own position. Alternatively, he offers the metaphor of the pit and the pendulum: on the one hand are essentialized (mechanical, instrumental, predictable) human geographers, on the other are those willing to “cut loose” into the postmodern abyss. And, he deploys a form of theoretical Creationism, an originary rhetoric in which it “all” dates back to Nietzsche. Even Nemeth’s heroic critical relativist in Figure 1 is shown jumping *off* modernism’s precipice.

We close, first, by thanking David Nemeth for his sustained and constructive critique of our essay, and second, by returning to the "text" that animated these essays. Nemeth makes the valid point that it was through the retelling of Uncle Albert's joke that George Banks finally disassociated himself from the grid epistemology of the banking world. But to valorize Albert's or even Mary's role in Banks's transformation is to unwittingly locate agency within the confines of an essential subject. In contrast, our allegory attempted to read the narrative of *Mary Poppins* as a series of epistemological engagements, and it is through these engagements that the joke - itself a potential allegorical vehicle - becomes effective.

Put differently, Banks does not have to become Mary Poppins, nor indeed, Uncle Albert. Thus, the question we posed in our essay remains: What *would* a transformed scientific geography look like and do? As the film's catalytic joke goes, Albert's nephew Bert says that he knows a "man with a wooden leg named Smith." But what, Albert replies, "is the name of his other leg?"

Reference

Dixon, Deborah P. and Jones III, John Paul. "For a Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious Scientific Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 86, No. 4, 1996, pp. 767-779.