

Part I

Historicizing Social Geography: From Theory to Methodology

This part introduces students to the variegated theoretical and methodological approaches social geographers employ in their research and analysis. Social geographers share a common interest in examining inequalities and difference but do so in a number of unique ways. From a rather open position toward “best practices,” it is suggested that different approaches answer different questions and that social geographers have to begin by asking what theory works best with what methodological approach. It is possible that social geographers can (and should) work through a number of different approaches while trying to answer questions of importance to the field, in particular, and society, more generally.



Chapter 1

Social Geography? What's That?

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The Demise of the Social and Rise of an “Ownership Society”

In 2003, former US President George W. Bush declared the creation of an “ownership society.” His bold social agenda, to improve the lives of US citizens by empowering them to take control of their own selves, is, in fact, a framework for a post-society world, where governments and the collective whole are no longer responsible for individuals. Thus, while individual rights and freedoms are vigorously defended in an ownership society, social programs and protections, such as affirmative action and anti-discrimination laws, are being dismantled. In Bush’s post-society world, every individual has the same opportunities and chances to buy a home, choose a job, and raise a family. As such, society and social relations of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality are largely irrelevant to modern-day discussions of political organization or economic development. Yet, as we know, social categories, such as African-American, Gay, Sunni Muslim, Migrant Worker,

American Citizen, continue to be powerful markers of difference, and in some cases inequality, in the world today. This is true even as globalization has intensified networked relations and rapidly increased flows of knowledge, communication, people, and ideas in the post-Second World War period.

Despite Bush's declarations that society should no longer be the default level of support for the individual, the social remains an incredibly important organizing framework across the world. Social identities and groupings – organized through nation-states, neighborhoods, or social networks – are continually used to distinguish both physical and social differences in numerous ways. One need only consider the emergence of Al Qaeda as a loosely configured social network based in an Islamist ideology or the Christian Conservative movement as a political force in the United States (and beyond). Both are social organizations/networks determined to maintain the boundaries of differences between an “us” and a “them.” More generally, as Hurricane Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005 clearly shows, social differences mean that certain groups and peoples are disadvantaged and disenfranchised by political and economic systems that choose to ignore the needs of some people while paying attention to others. Thus, while so-called natural disasters are sometimes “great equalizers” because they can kill and maim indiscriminately, they often expose social differences and inequalities. The deaths of thousands of poorer coastal dwellers in Sri Lanka and Indonesia during the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 attests to how certain social groups are much more likely to be exposed to danger because of their level of impoverishment.

At the same time, social organizations, groups, and identities can come together to support a broader collective set of needs or desires. Queer social movements reorganize difference around a positive center instead of a negative margin. By claiming the social identity “queer,” peoples of various ethnic, racial, national, or gendered groups create social networks and connections that affirm the rights of individuals to be publicly and privately gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, intersexed without discrimination. In being actively queer, it is clear that difference is not inherently negative. In fact, difference is positively asserted through the conscious and active development of multicultural or pluralistic societies and institutions, where differences are cultivated within a framework of acceptance, tolerance, and mutual support. This applies not only to what are considered the “traditional” areas of social difference based in race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but also to other sites of difference. As an example, homeless and migrant labor advocates assert the rights of these particular social groups, who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized, by reidentifying them as productive, contributing members of society. New social networks, organized around anti-globalization movements, also provide challenges to the intensification of capitalist development in places across the globe. While loosely connected, these social networks of activists share a common interest in minimizing the destructive impacts of unfettered capitalism, constructing a common identity that works across other social boundaries, such as race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, or sexuality.

While studying the social involves analyzing groups and broader categories, it is also possible to focus on the everyday practices of individuals and their negotiations of the broader social milieu. Everyday practices operate in the context of social rules and orders, which are not always overtly displayed. In fact, social order is often maintained because individuals consciously and unconsciously reinforce those orders through our own practices. Take the very mundane act of using a public restroom. In many societies, the public restroom is clearly marked with a gendered identity, either male or female. Using the public restroom “properly” reaffirms the difference between men and women as it is inscribed on the door of this public space. Interestingly, despite the social difference between men and women being thought of as fixed and permanent – as it is written on the bathroom door after all – gender as a social category is quite unstable. Remaining with our bathroom example for a moment we can see how, in certain places, gender categories are organized much differently. In Thailand, some college campuses have established bathrooms for *kathoey*, transgendered men. At the University of California at Berkeley and Vassar College in the USA some bathrooms are unisex and men and women use them simultaneously. These new social and spatial frameworks are always situated within a broader context, as individuals and groups struggle to live in a world defined by their complicated interrelationship to “others.” In this case, people negotiate how bathroom spaces are being defined for and by the loosely defined categories “men” and “women.”

Tracing social differences and inequalities across the globe, it is clear that networks, relations, groups, and identities are organized not just socially but geographically as well. It is possible to examine where certain social groups are concentrated and how those concentrations are related to other social groups and concentrations. National censuses often provide geographers with a wealth of data that can be mapped and analyzed for spatial relationships, investigating the location of African-American populations in the United States, the distributions of birthrates in Italy, or the dynamic change in HIV cases in Zimbabwe over time. These patterns can be compared to other data patterns to see if poverty and race/ethnicity or poverty and health are related spatially: asking are they proximate, overlapping, or identical? Of course, there are always potential problems in defining who belongs to one social group or another. In fact, this is a problem that social scientists struggle with everyday. Yet we know that these groupings are at work in the world around us; they become part of how we see ourselves not just as members of societies but also as members of certain places and communities.

However we choose to define and in some cases demarcate social groupings, we can investigate how certain spaces and places are distinguished by their relationship to various social identities and categories. Take, for example, Kurdistan, a non-existent nation-state that remains an important geographic framework for the assertion of Kurdish ethnic self-determination in Southwest Asia (see Figure 1.1). Despite the fact that the Kurds are spread across five different states – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia – there remains a strong ethnic interest linking that identity to an independent national space. At a more microlevel, there are ethnic enclaves



Figure 1.1 A map of “Kurdistan.” (Cartography by James Woods, CSU, Long Beach, Department of Geography.)

in urban centers, such as Algerian neighborhoods in Paris, which are complicated by the politics of inclusion and exclusion that mark such spaces. We can see how social relations constitute the lived spaces of everyday interaction, and how spaces are material markers of certain social experiences.

It is clear, then, that there are a lot of concepts relevant to social geographic analysis, not the least of which is what we mean by the terms social, geography, and social geography. As you can already tell from this limited introduction, the “social” is a complicated term, often linked to a number of other terms, such as identity, category, relation, system, network, or group. When the term “social” is used with the term “geography” it becomes even more complex because now we must consider what we mean by how the social is also always geographic. We also have to tease out the spatial dynamics of everyday social life in order to investigate the complicated relationships between society and space. Fortunately, this is not a new endeavor for geographers. Geographers before us have traced out the diverse ways to study the social and society. It is to this history of ideas that we must turn to ground what social geographers are doing today in a longer trajectory of thoughts, approaches, and practices. In so doing, we can begin to enjoy

social geography not as a singular way of knowing and seeing the world, but as it really is, a variegated and contested set of theoretical and methodological concerns.

What Is Social Geography?

As part of my doctoral program in the 1990s, I spent eighteen months living and researching nongovernmental health care programs for people living with HIV and AIDS in Chiang Mai, Thailand. During that time, I was asked over and over again: What do you do? What are you studying? At first, I offered a complicated, and to be honest a rather convoluted, description of myself as a geographer: "I study how spaces are organized for the purposes of health and health care" or "I am interested in how people experience different places differently." As is the case in many other places, people were perplexed by my interest in geography and HIV/AIDS. What could a geographer possibly be studying about AIDS? "Are you mapping AIDS?" someone might ask. Over time, as my Thai language skills got better, I nuanced my response to these questions; I began to identify not as a geographer (*nakphumisat*) but as a social geographer (*nakphumisat thang sangkhom*). This qualification seemed to work, as people began to identify me as someone who was interested in social issues related to the practices of social institutions, such as the health care and educational sectors, governmental and political organizations, and nongovernmental and community-based networks and associations. At the time, I didn't think much of this switch. To be honest, like most of my colleagues in graduate school, I wasn't a big fan of subdisciplinary labels. But, upon reflection, I see this qualification, as someone who is a *social geographer* and not just a geographer, as an important one. It is important because it signals that my interests lie in questions related to the social, to the dynamic geographies of difference and inequality that are central to the everyday lives of so many people, not the least of whom were people at the center of my research, those living with HIV and AIDS in northern Thailand.

Even though I codified my identity as a social geographer, and, as a result, created a rather simple definition of my work, I believe that social geography is much more complex than its singular status initially belies. It is better thought of as a constellation of theoretical and methodological approaches that converge and diverge in an attempt to understand and explain the spatial organization of what we could think of broadly as difference and inequality. Interestingly, tracing the histories of these various social geographic theories and approaches is complicated by the fact that, at least in the context of the United States from where I am writing, social geography as a subdisciplinary identity has ebbed and flowed over the past 100 years of academic geography.¹ At the same time, many social geographic questions are being investigated under the guise of political, economic, urban, and, more commonly, cultural geography. Many of these geographies are, for me at least, informed by various social theories: they trace out the ways in which social life and interaction is constructed and produced through political institutions,

economic organizations, urban spatial arrangements, or cultural practices. It is to this intersection between social theory and social geography that I now turn. Although theory is something that is often constructed as “scary” or “abstract,” I want to suggest that social theories inform all of our social geographies. No one should be afraid to be theoretical. Instead, we need to understand, no matter what question interests us, how that question is informed by our theories about the social world.

Social theory and social geography

In the simplest sense, theory is a set of assumptions used to explain a subject of study. Theories can never perfectly represent the world “as it is.” If they could, cartographers would be able to create a one-to-one representation of the world, where everything that exists in every place could be located on their map. But they don’t. Instead, cartographers, like all social scientists, make choices about what should be included on the map. These choices are informed by the question they are trying to answer or address (MacEachren 2004) and by the social context in which they are making that map (Pickles 2004). Like cartographers, social geographers, from those who claim to work in the scientific method to those who classify themselves as social constructionists, understand today – to differing degrees – that theories are representations, sometimes striving toward although never completely explaining the “real world.” More generally, people think theoretically all the time; theory is, in fact, part of our own everyday lives. You have certainly heard someone quip, “That was a Freudian slip.” Well, who was this Freud person anyway, and why did his theorizations about the human conscious and subconscious slip anyway? If you start to really think about it, while we don’t always discuss our theoretical assumptions overtly in every context, theories permeate thinking not only about social geography but also cultural geography (Mitchell 2000), economic geography (Wood and Roberts 2008), and, even, physical geography (Inkpen 2004).

Social theory, more specifically, is the set of assumptions utilized to explain social life, be that the distribution of social groups across space, the social construction of nature and culture, or the social regulation of political and economic development and institutions. In recent years, geographers have become much more interested in being explicit about these social theoretical assumptions. They are critically reflecting on the past work of geographers, which might not have explicitly articulated their theoretical positions. This critical historical work suggests that social geography is informed by a number of theoretical approaches, often identified by an overarching (political) theoretical perspective, e.g. anarchism (Kropotkin 1971), environmental determinism (Semple 1910), possibilism (Vidal del la Blache 1903), positivism (Schaefer 1953), marxism (Peet 1977), feminism (Rose 1993), queer theory (Browne et al. 2007), postmodernism (Soja 1989), or poststructuralism (Doel 1999). Each of these theoretical perspectives presents a unique definition of the relationships between society and space, terms informed by each theory’s own set of assumptions.

These assumptions are based in a social theorist's ontology (their understanding of how the world is structured to produce knowledge) and epistemology (their understanding of how we know the world). Ontologically speaking, social theorists employ different understandings of how the world *is*, conceptually presupposing the context in which societies develop and individuals interact. As an example, some social theorists – certain Marxists, for example – believe that the world is organized through deep social structures based in capitalism, through which a set of historically constituted social categories – capitalist and worker – regulate all social interaction. These thinkers believe that societies based in capitalism structure individual social experiences relationally through the struggle between the working class and the elite. For them, there is an ontological order in the world structured by capitalism even if they can't see it clearly. This order mediates everything people do. Epistemologically, social theorists ask how it might be possible to understand that same social world. Again, social theorists who believe that deep structures organize the world into categories of being, such as capitalist or laborer, might also suggest that they study capitalism through the study of subjective experiences of capitalist development. Put simply, it is possible to study the effects of capitalism through the subjective experiences of production and reproduction. In all cases, social theorists build upon an accepted vocabulary of understanding used to describe societal forms of existence (their ontology) as well as “how we can get to know these different possibilities of existence” (their epistemology) (Kuhkle 2006: 146). It is these social theoretical vocabularies and their ontological and epistemological assumptions with which we will be interested throughout the first part of this book (see Box 1.1). Importantly, we will also ask how these various vocabularies and assumptions inform social geographic methodologies – the process by which theorists translate their ontologies and epistemologies, defining what the research data will be, what approaches or procedures will be followed, and what core principles and objects/subjects will be examined.

Box 1.1 Social Theory and Social Geography

Environmental determinism. A philosophy positing that social development is determined by the environmental conditions in which societies developed. This philosophical position generally fell out of favor in geography in the early twentieth century.

Possibilism. This theory, which is attached to the French school of cultural geography in the early twentieth century, suggests that while the physical environment offers certain constraints on the social world, humans can modify the environment to meet their needs.

Anarchism. This is both a philosophy and a political position. It suggests that society is owned collectively, while arguing that societies should eliminate

(or minimize) government influence to maximize individual freedoms through voluntarism. This philosophical approach held limited appeal in geography at the turn of the twentieth century. It was resurrected in the 1970s as part of the social relevance movement in the discipline, and still holds sway with certain thinkers in social geography today.

Positivism. A philosophical position arguing that research must be based on empirical observations, which can be tested, repeated, and developed into scientific laws. Positivist geographers create models of and laws pertaining to the social and spatial organization of societies through the use of the scientific method. Positivism informed a significant amount of social geography for the better part of the 1960s and 1970s, although the development of critical rationalism modified this scientific method in the 1970s.

Critical rationalism. Karl Popper proposed in the 1960s that theory does not reflect the real world. It is not possible to determine a truth; it is only possible to assess whether or not a hypothesis is false. In the process of building theory, critical rationalists develop a number of hypotheses to analyze whether or not an initial premise is false. Many quantitative social geographers rely on a critical rationalist approach today, testing hypotheses to determine their “truthfulness.”

Structuralism. A theoretical framework that developed in the study of linguistics and cultural anthropology, which suggests that individual linguistic practices (signifiers) represent underlying sociocultural and political-economic processes (signified) in which they are produced. Broadly speaking, structuralist thinking began to be used by Marxists, feminists, and other radical geographers in the 1970s and 1980s.

Marxism. Marxists argue that capitalism is productive of an uneven geography that privileges exploitation of the working classes’ limited access to resources in and across space. Led by a number of key “radical geographers” in the 1970s, Marxist geography began with the basic assumption that capitalism structures all social and spatial relations. Marxist geography is still represented in the work of social (and cultural) geographers today, and remains an important political position for many in the field, who seek to challenge systems of inequality based in class (race, gender, and sexual) politics.

Feminism. Feminism is both a theoretical position – informing a critique of patriarchy – and a political position – focusing on the politics of equity and equality for women. Feminism entered geography in the 1970s and was first seen as a corrective to the discipline’s masculinist narratives. While first wave feminists sought to increase the visibility of women in the discipline, second and third wave feminists now theorize the relationship between gender, difference, and inequality from a variety of perspectives.

Postcolonialism. This set of theoretical approaches developed in the 1970s and entered geography in the 1980s and 1990s. Based in a specific critique of colonialism and neocolonialism, postcolonial theory is diverse and encompasses approaches that refocus intellectual narratives away from the “center” (i.e. former colonial powers) and toward the “margins” (i.e. former colonial spaces). It is also informed by subaltern studies and, confusingly, the term also refers to a period: the postcolonial.

Queer theory. Queer theory is both a theoretical position – informing critiques of heteronormativity – and a political position – opening up space for various sexualities and sexual differences. Queer theorists work against the presumption that all space is heterosexual. Queer theory also suggests that spaces of difference must be central to social geography. Like feminist geographies, queer geographies argue that questions related to social justice, particularly, although not exclusively, around decentering normative notions of sexuality, be of direct concern to geography.

Postmodernism. This term refers to a variegated set of philosophical approaches. In geography, postmodern philosophies developed in the 1980s as a challenge to structuralism as well as the other philosophies positing that deep structures, such as capitalism or patriarchy, determined social and spatial relations. As a philosophy, postmodernism has informed a number of theorizations of urban space and the relationship between social and spatial identities. Postmodern philosophy underpins social geography's expanded interest in understanding and examining difference(s).

Poststructuralism. A theoretical framework that developed out of a critique of structuralism, suggesting that linguistic practices, discourses, and texts have no essential characteristic but are constructed temporarily through the deployment of power. In geography, poststructuralist theory informs the study of representations and representational politics as well as the politics of identity and subjectivity. Poststructuralism is better conceptualized as a broad set of theories informed by a number of different philosophies, such as deconstruction and psychoanalysis, than a singular theoretical approach or methodology.

Quick Exercise

Identify an article of interest in social geography. Using the definitions set out above try to determine what social theoretical approach the author of that article is using in her or his analysis.

In its own ways, each social theory provides a language defining what the social means, articulates unique questions about social life, and conceives of social data in particular ways. As we delve further into the history of social geographic ideas and practices we will tease out the differing ways in which social geographers frame some of their key terms, including society, the social, and geography, as well as terms associated with social geographic inquiry, including social space, group, identity, justice, network, relation, and production and reproduction, to name a few. Moreover, we will investigate the social contexts in which this work is being conducted: we will treat social geographers and their work as part of societies – e.g. US society – and social networks and organizations – e.g. the Association of American Geographers – as we examine how they construct their social theories in relation to those contexts.

By suggesting that social theories are always situated, it is important to also understand that social theories are not ideas floating around “out there” beyond us. They are constructed, realized, and utilized in various places to explain both particular experiences and general processes. What I mean to suggest is that social theory is always engaged in what Derek Gregory (1994: 79, his emphasis) calls “an *intervention in social life*.” It is an “intervention” because social theory does not take place “in some isolated laboratory, [is] not ‘applied’ from outside, but *worked with*” to make “social life intelligible” (ibid., his emphasis). Gregory argues that researchers have to consciously consider how our theorizations of social life are part of the processes of reorganizing (or complicating) the world in which we live. This is a concern that is echoed by numerous other scholars, including those working in the areas of feminist geography (Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 2007), cultural geography (Mitchell 2000), and critical cartography and GIS (Pickles 1995), to name just a few. Like Freud’s “slip,” then, social theories about geographic process, form, and practice overtly and covertly inform urban planning projects or social development programs. Even though researchers take objectivity seriously, believing themselves to be good scientists who are distanced and impartial, they might employ that objectivity in ways that validate their claims to change how the social world is spatially organized – creating residential and commercial zoning patterns that seem to “make sense” to them. As Gregory’s understanding of social theory suggests, social geographers cannot pretend that they somehow exist completely outside the world about which they are researching or writing (Katz 1994). Moreover, it suggests that there is nothing wrong with intervening and critically addressing questions of how social differences are spatially organized, how and why spatial inequalities emerge, or what social geographers can do to address how differences and inequalities might be rearticulated to create new spatial formations that appreciate difference or mediate inequality.

This does not mean that social geographers have always worked with this particular reading of what is often called “critical social theory” (Agger 2006). In fact, geographers have been complicit in exacerbating differences through their use of theories that have suggested in the past that certain societies, races, and ethnic groups were inferior to others (Huntington 1915). Social geographers have also deployed

their trade in various colonial and imperial projects (see Godlewska and Smith 1994); they have also been criticized for being blind to gender and sexualized differences (Rose 1993; Bell and Valentine 1995). From a situated position today, though, it is possible to employ critical social theories to explain how and why some geographers have taken up these particular perspectives. Throughout the remainder of this text, then, we will consider the relationships between social theories, broadly conceived, and social geographies, in all their complexity. This text will do so, as well, by signposting where social geography “touches down” with broader social theoretical concerns, introducing along the way social theorists who are not typically identified as social geographers but whose work can help to explain the complex relationships between the social and the spatial, society and space (Hubbard et al. 2004).

A primer on “society” and “space”

Before we move any further, it is necessary to delve a bit deeper into some basic concepts and terms in social geography. First of all, social geography is focused on an analysis of societies. Yet society is, itself, a highly contested term. In its simplest sense, society refers to the collective sense of connectivity between various individuals, the social relationships they develop. One can, for example, think of societies as spatially diffuse, constructed through various social networks across space (e.g. a cyberspace society, such as a society of gamers or MySpace bloggers, or a diasporic society, such as the Jews or the Palestinians). Society also has a politically material (or regional) definition, constituted by the bounding of various spaces into discrete political units (e.g. towns, cities, counties, provinces, countries, or nations). In this political case, one could think of the society of the United States of America or Papua New Guinea, with all the potential nationalist undertones that such a definition might bring to a discussion in social geography. Importantly, society is not simply “out there”; it is a term and concept that social scientists, activists, and politicians use to describe, identify, and sometimes validate the identities of those they seek to study, the processes that they hope to explain, and the broader connections and relationships between one set of societal networks or regions and another.

Confusing matters is the fact that the “social” is a term that applies to both the mundane sets of everyday relations in which people engage (e.g. our “social” circle) *and* the sets of social groups, identities, or communities to which people might “belong” (queer, feminist, black nationalist, etc). This means, of course, that social geographers might define the “social” in a number of different ways. First, they might think of the “social” as the relationships between people and the communities to which they belong. We can think about our own communities, both the communities to which we consciously subscribe, such as our friends, and the networks that we are part of because of our particular location, such as our schools or neighborhoods. Second, the social can be conceptualized as a set of categories or identities. These are often constituted through descriptive adjectives based in definition of age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexuality. Social geographers must

therefore be aware of the complicated ways in which social scientists have thought about and applied these adjectives.

Of course, the breadth of possible social categories explodes when we examine how social categories are used in everyday practice (e.g. African-American, conservative Christian, or gay Latino), further complicating any definition of “society.” As John Urry (2000: 2) argues, “the material transformations that are remaking the ‘social’, especially those diverse mobilities that, through multiple senses, imaginative travel, movements of images and information, virtuality and physical movement, are materially constructing the ‘social as society’ into the ‘social as mobility’” in ways that belie any straightforward definition of the terms “society” or the “social.” Social geographers have also concerned themselves with a “mobile social” in their studies of nomadism (Dorn 1997; May 2000) and hybridity (MacLeod 1998; Whatmore 2002), focusing attention on the fluid and contested nature of social categories and spaces. This is a challenge to the historical focus on a fixed and discrete notion of space, although it also highlights the importance of studying social networks and interactions.

If the terms “society” and the “social” are not confusing enough, geographers expand the meanings of these terms by examining the relationship between society and space, the social and the spatial. This means, of course, that we need to have a broad understanding of what geographers mean by the terms space and the spatial. Naturally, of course, nothing is ever as easy or straightforward as we would hope; the definitions of these terms vary depending on the theoretical and methodological assumptions you use as a geographer. First, spatial scientists utilize an absolute or discrete view of space. In this view, space is seen as a “backdrop” to social relations, a plane across which one can plot various locations, points, and nodes. Social geographers also place boundaries around space, examining differences and similarities across and between discrete spatial units. And they investigate the development of spatial networks across space and analyze how certain social attributes “decay” over distance from a particular point in space. Furthermore, they can expand their spatial analysis temporally, by examining how objects in and across space change over time, or investigate how the relationships between objects in space-time change in relation to each other. So a spatial scientist might map the spatial organization of various ethnic groups in a city, examining that representation in relation to another map of income distributions. Using the census tract as a basis for such a map, they might be able to identify areas with high concentrations of poverty that are correlated to certain distributions of one or more ethnic groups. Or we might trace the diffusion of a culture group by tracking certain characteristics as they are placed upon what Carl Sauer (1925) called the cultural landscape, investigating the artifacts of human practice through an analysis of various physical material objects, such as houses, street signs, or other mundane objects.

Second, humanistic geographers believe that space is not simply a backdrop to social relations, but that spaces are repositories of human meaning. Put simply, people construct social spaces, or places, through their interactions with the cultural landscape, which is both material and symbolic. Through human action, people

create unique place meanings and each place is invested with its own *sense* or *feeling*. This means that social spaces or places develop over time that both include and exclude individuals, creating feelings of being “in place” and “out of place.” Humanistically inspired geographers are particularly interested in how various representations of place and immaterial social processes, tied to religion, language, or ethnicity, are used by individuals to construct their own lifeworlds. And, very often, humanistic geographers use the term “space” to refer to “a realm without meaning,” although more and more humanistic geographers use the term “social space” synonymously with the term “place,” where both are juxtaposed to an “abstract” or “empty” space (Cresswell 2004: 10). Furthermore, humanistic geographers contrast their vision of place as “lived experience” with landscape, which “focus[es] on the material topography of a portion of land (that which can be seen) with the notion of vision (the way it is seen)” (ibid.).

Third, radical geographers argue that spaces are both produced by *and* productive of various social relations of, for example, economic production and reproduction. This is what Ed Soja (1980) has defined as the “socio-spatial dialectic,” where social relations are said to construct certain spaces and those spaces act upon social relations or processes. Unlike the subjectively inspired humanistic perspective of social space, whereby individuals construct their own meanings of the world and their places, a radical view suggests that the spatial organization of society mediates, and in certain ways controls, our experiences of places. For example, the processes of capitalism regulate the spatial organization of the city. As a result, poverty and crime are contained in specific underprivileged spaces, which effectively maintain economic- and racist-based inequalities. The spaces of poverty are necessary because capitalism is reliant on what Marx called an “industrial reserve army” of labor, a ready-made unskilled pool of workers that can be pulled out of poor areas temporarily for work when the market is doing well. Spaces are structured to sustain social differences and inequalities, producing what Neil Smith (1984) calls “uneven development” at the local and global scales. In similar ways, feminist Marxist scholars have suggested that the spatial organization of society not only favors free market capitalism and certain privileges for elites but does so in ways that disenfranchise women and the spaces and practices of reproduction (Mitchell et al. 2004). Put simply, space is not a backdrop or a site of meaning, it is an actor helping to construct and regulate social relations between individuals, groups, and societies.

Fourth, poststructuralist geographers argue that space is a social construction constituted through the use of language. Space is made “real” through the use of certain discourses – or ways of defining and marking it. Of particular interest to poststructuralist geographers has been the “representational turn” in geography, whereby key geographic concepts – region, periphery, and network – are thought of as texts, which can be read like other representations, such as the map. Put this way, landscapes are more than the material relics that we, as humans, leave on them; they are texts that are organized through relations of power to produce certain effects and affects. There is nothing “essential” to the landscape, though,

as these spaces are organized through the dominant social narratives situated in a particular point in time and space. As Susan Mains (2006: 112) suggests, the use of various spatial discourses about “certain people, social practices, or places” helps to create a “normal” or “naturalized” image of what is supposed to happen in any given space. Importantly, poststructuralist geographers do not believe that only those in dominant, or what are called hegemonic, positions are capable of constructing spatial discourses. Resistant spaces – in the form of territorial markers like graffiti, for example – contest dominant narratives of what is “appropriate” or “inappropriate” spatially. Poststructuralist space is thus a performed space of both power and resistance. As such, social identities are tied to how people perform where and who they are as individuals, community members, and social beings.

What all this complexity means, really, is that social geographers have developed a large vocabulary of terms and concepts related to their various views of space. Each view of space is tied to a number of key concepts within the discipline more generally. These concepts underwrite different methodological approaches and frameworks, an issue with which we will deal more extensively in Chapter 3. In the meantime, though, we want to begin to reflect on this complexity and relish in it. While it can be confusing and daunting, it also illustrates that social geographers have created a wide array of analytic tools for asking questions about the spatial organization, distribution, and relationship of and between its twin concerns of social difference and inequality.

Sociospatial difference and inequality examined

Before we go any further, it is important to briefly outline what have historically been the two main conceptual centerpieces of social geographic inquiry and analysis: difference and inequality. While social geographers have treated these concepts quite differently over time, the basic notion that the social world is spatially organized through the use and understanding of social difference has been fairly consistent. In fact, social geographers have long based their analyses in the study of the spatial differences that emerge across and through social categories of ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and, in recent years, sexuality, focusing, for example, on the spatial distribution of certain ethnic groups as they cluster in and across the city. Many social geographers have also been concerned with how the spatial organization of the social world impacts on experiences of these various categories of difference. Put simply, social geographers not only want to study the distribution and diffusion of social differences across space, they also want to study how humans understand their “place in the world” through their experiences of spaces that are, themselves, invested with social meanings attached to various categories of difference. Thus, they are interested in examining the spatial organization of social differences and the development of ethnic neighborhoods and how those same neighborhoods are experienced, understood, and interpreted by those who live in and travel through them.

At the same time, social geographers are concerned not only for how social differences are sociospatially organized and experienced, but how these organizational and experiential dynamics impact on individual and group access to key resources, be those economic, political, or social. Social geographers are therefore deeply concerned with the embedded inequalities found in everyday spaces; they want to not only understand who lives where but why they live where they do and what that might mean for their life on a day-to-day basis. This concern for the study of social inequality is most notable in social geography's longtime study of the relationship between the spatial organization of race, ethnicity, and poverty (e.g. Morrill 1973). Moreover, social geographers have taken their concerns regarding the inequality of resource allocation to the study of gender, analyzing how the spatial organization of resources might disenfranchise women more than men (Jones and Kodras 1990; Kodras et al. 1994). In sum, social geography is committed to an analysis of how the spatial organization of society differentially enfranchises certain social groups and peoples while disenfranchising others. Social geography, then, is most concerned with the inequities that may be constituted through the embodied and material experiences of, for example, being "abled" or "disabled" (Gleeson 1999), "young" or "old" (Aitken 2001; Andrews and Phillips 2005). And social geographers continually recognize that the very basis of these social categories of difference are based in historical and spatial context: the meaning of disability changes in time and space and, therefore, the spatial organization of spaces for people who may be physically disabled changes as well (Parr and Butler 1999).

The twin concern for the geography of difference and inequality informs social geography's larger empirical questions, which tend to focus on issues such as homelessness, poverty, race and racism, production and reproduction, sexism and heterosexism, ableism, mental and physical health, crime, children's spaces, and community and social activism, to name just a few. Social geographers are motivated by these issues because they are concerned with how spaces are organized to reflect the differences that exist across social categories as well as how some spaces reinforce certain differences (both positively and negatively) and accessibility (in terms of both inequality and equality). This is why social geography has a "global imagination" and remains concerned with *both* how differences and inequalities are experienced by individuals and communities *and* how those differences and inequalities are organized in and across broader global (world) regions. Social geographic research thus overlaps with the work of development and postcolonial geographers interested in understanding how the world is organized across a global north (e.g. "developed" countries) and global south (e.g. "developing" countries) divide (see Box 1.2). Further breaking down questions of scale, though, social geographers are committed to investigating the experiences of those people from the so-called global south who live, work, and try to survive in the global north, illustrating the world's growing social interconnectivity (Merrill 2006).

Over the course of social geography's development, social geographers have grown more concerned with how people "experience" social difference and inequality. In so doing, social geographers are motivated to challenge and complicate social

Box 1.2 Defining the “Global North” and the “Global South”

There is no easy way to discuss “difference” at a global scale, and the terms used to explain global differences are informed by the historical and geographical situations in which they are being used. The terms “global north” and “global south” are an attempt to correct the use of other economically based terms, such as First World and Third World and developed world and developing world, as well as core and periphery. Global north and global south are terms that provide a more open definition of global difference, one based in social relations and cultural differences *and* political and economic disparity. In mapping the global north and global south, it is possible to discern a broad trend line that divides the world, roughly, between a wealthier north and a poorer south. This is approximate to the famous Brandt Line, which was proposed by German Chancellor William Brandt, to distinguish global difference. There are immediate exceptions to this line and to a global north/global south distinction, including the fact that Australia, New Zealand, and sometimes South Africa are considered part of the global north.

This language is by no means perfect, and other geographers have suggested an alternative language, including the use of the terms “minority” and “majority” worlds. Samantha Punch (2000: 60) argues: the “Minority World refers to the ‘First World’ and Majority World refers to the ‘Third World’.” This is because the Majority World has the greatest proportion of the world’s population and the largest land mass compared to the smaller size of the Minority World . . . present terms used to differentiate the economically richer and poorer regions of the world are either incorrect (East–West, North–South) or have negative connotations for the poorer countries.” It is also essential to remember that any global definition will generalize away the complexity found within the global north and global south. It is important to be cognizant of the very complicated politics of difference and inequality found within these two regional constructs. For purposes of consistency with the broader literature, including a growing scholarship on the “global south,” this text will continue to use these terms. As you read, though, you should also make your own decisions about terminology and how best to describe difference at a global scale.

Quick Exercise

Go to the library and do a journal-based literature search on the terms “global north” and “geography” and “global south” and “geography.” Then, narrow the search to “social geography” from “geography.” What topics of study are typically associated with these terms?

models that ignore differences. There is, after all, not just a single geography of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality, which are further complicated by the intersections between these categories as well as others, such as age, ability, and nationality. The study of differences and inequalities is thus motivated by social geography's general concern with issues related to equity, oppression, and justice. And, while social geographers sometimes disagree about how to go about enacting change or constructing equity and access, they are all interested in understanding how differences and inequalities are produced and constructed as well as experienced and challenged.

On a "Critical" Social Geography

As this is a book in a series titled *Critical Introductions*, I thought it important to reflect on the term critical social geography. I do so because scholars often use the term "critical" differently. For some, to be critical simply means to be analytical, while for others, critical geography is a political practice, tied to an interest in realigning the relations of power that construct inequalities. For some others still, to be critical means to relish in difference, celebrating the diversity of possibilities and social identities they might embody and spaces they might inhabit. For me, criticality is all these things at once. A critical social geographer is not interested in the status quo because it is understood that the world has developed in ways that are inequitable and unjust. To be critical is to also understand that the world is marked by social and spatial practices that constitute certain social identities and spaces as different in both negative and positive ways. We live in a world, unfortunately, marked by ableism, ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, ageism, and classism, and these practices are intimately tied to our spatial world in ways that mean we are not always allowed to celebrate our differences positively.

As for a "critical" view of space, there is value in being open and pluralistic. First and foremost, critical social geographers must understand that their views of space inform their geographic questions (Del Casino et al. 2000; Del Casino and Jones 2007). Those questions cannot and will not answer (or resolve) every geographic concern regarding inequality and difference. So it is both possible and necessary to utilize different conceptualizations of space while trying to answer important social geographic questions. Being critical means being engaged in a project of understanding inequality and difference, however, in the hope of producing knowledge that will, in some small way, create positive change. To do this, many radical and even some poststructuralist geographers are rethinking the relationship between their own research and the tools of spatial science, particularly mapping technologies related to geographic information systems (GIS) or remote sensing (Elwood and Leitner 2003; Ghose and Elwood 2003). Other geographers are working across conceptual frameworks to develop research that utilizes humanistic and radical (Kearns and Joseph 1997) or spatial scientific and radical views of space (Lobao et al. 1999).

It is therefore possible to utilize a number of different concepts of space and society in one study, and ask questions from a variety of different viewpoints that might let us triangulate how and why inequalities remain or how differences are performed in and through space.

Where Do We Go from Here?

This brief discussion has just scratched the surface of social geography as a field of knowledge and way of knowing and understanding the world. It is now necessary to flush out the longer historical trajectory of social geography as a set of academic practices. To do this, it is important to step back and take a historical look at how social geography has developed over time, while considering the different ways in which social geographers have practiced their “science” in the recent past. Taking this historical perspective, this text will try to untangle the different ways that social geographers have conceptualized the relationship between society and space, the social and the spatial. It will also tease out the different concepts social geographers have used to examine these relationships. This brief march through disciplinary history is not simply an exercise in gazing at our own navels; it has analytic purpose. We want to understand how and why social geography developed the way it did and what this means for the questions and concerns social geographers have today. In the next chapter, then, we briefly trace the history of social geography’s plurality.

To complete the first part of this text, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approaches of social geographers. In this chapter, methodology is theorized as a mesolevel theoretical process through which social geographers translate their epistemological and ontological assumptions into their understanding of what their data might be and how they might go about asking questions of those data. This chapter also examines what methods and techniques might best be applied to a particular methodology. Each theoretical set of assumptions presupposes a particular view of space. Each view of space, in turn, also presupposes what the data will be and how one might go about collecting and analyzing them. As we move through this discussion of epistemology, ontology, and methodology, we will develop a sophisticated and complex reading of what social geography is and how we might develop our own skills as social geographers.

Note

- 1 There are other contexts, particularly the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, and New Zealand, to name just a few, where social geographic traditions have flourished (see extended discussion in Kitchin 2007). Social geography has also been debated in these contexts (see, in the UK context, Philo 1991; Gregson 1993, 2003; Peach 1999; Valentine 2001).