TOWARDS A DIALECICAL GEOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Most current geography is regarded by many geographers and other social scientists as a mere synthesis of fragmented elements often void of logical linkages or objective causal relations, and thus unable to provide convincing explanations for a multiplicity of phenomena and spatial, social and temporal relations despite its encyclopedic language and huge accumulated information and data. This relative poverty of geographical inquiry emanates from the inappropriate methodological tools which we apply uncritically, and which have rendered geography an apologetic and conformist academic discipline, consolidating the capitalist mode of production with its universalized socio-economic relations, structures and values and its epistemological categories

The introduction of relatively recent methodologies in geographical analysis has not reduced the gravity of the problem. The behavioural approach, for example, tends to individualize people and communities, and to externalize the individual from his/her socio-economic context of which he/she is a product. Thus we cannot generate objective theories out of unique individualized behaviours. Likewise, the quantitative techniques, despite their limited positive results when sufficiently critically applied, like assigning measurement and precision to geographical research, have not solved the problem because 'we yet have

to fully apprehend the fact that we have to think in order to measure and not to measure in order to think' .. It is not just quantification or measurement which we need because such quantification or measurement depends squarely on our objective comprehension of what, how and why we need to quantify or measure. Our indiscriminate and uncritical application of theories, models and methodologies developed in other fields of human knowledge, like statistical techniques and mathematical, behavioural and economic models, have partially incapacitated our discipline because of their high degree of abstraction and the sharp differences in the reference framework between geography and these other disciplines.

This short paper argues that the elaborate application of the dialectical approach would immensely improve our understanding of our objective world, human societies and the geographical and social phenomena and relations. Dialectics, as a tool of analysis, allow the inner penetration of spatial structures into their underlying social processes and causes. It will thus help render geography a more useful discipline conducive, in collaboration with other sciences, to socio-spatial change and transformation.

The concept of dialectics simply refers to an internal oppositional relation between two terms which are defined in opposition to each other. They are dialectically related because they are mutually definitive, and the existence of each necessitates the existence of the other however unrelated they are presumed or appear to be.

GEOGRAPHY, PHILOSOPHY AND DIALECTICS

Geographical knowledge is an integral part of the general human knowledge, and both are united in the theory of knowledge and the cognitive process through which all forms of knowledge are produced and developed on the basis of the sensory processes and social practice and the material and immaterial forms of production (Eltayeb, 1995:11). Distancing geography from some types of human knowledge, especially philosophy, is a part of the root causes of the poverty of geography.

Because of our limited concern with theory building and low regard for the necessary abstract considerations, we do not feel the need for comprehending the principles and laws of logic so long as our prime concern is almost exclusively with what is materially determined. But we dismiss the fact that what is materially determined is a mental construct formed by the dialectical formulation of the elements and relations of the cognitive and epistemological processes.

The historical evolution of geography reveals that it has never been – and its current status confirms that it will never be – void of philosophical foundations and dialectical relations. Brief reference to leading philosophers will suffice. For Kant (1974), our knowledge of the world is based either on what is consistent with the laws of necessity (our real knowledge about nature) or on the organisms which act according to the laws of freedom (our knowledge about human beings). Both to Kant are pragmatic and not speculative forms of knowledge. Geography to Kant is essentially physical geography into which human beings appear as physical features, and which forms the basis and incorporates the basic elements of other geographies like political geography and commercial geography. Hence the crux of the Kantian geographical theory is the

separation between speculative and pragmatic subjects (between rational reason and practical experience), and to a lesser degree the separation between geography and sociology and between nature and history (Eltayeb, 1995:20).

On the other hand, geography has been addressed very differently in the philosophy of Hegel who treats geography not as a purely physical discourse, but rather as a branch of history, i.e as a study of the modes of living or subsistence being offered by the environment to the local inhabitants, and as a key to understand the history of the word (Hegel,1975). The difference between Kant and Hegel emanates from their different philosophical constructs. Hegel strives at avoiding the shortcomings of the Kantian philosophy, particularly the separation between nature and history, between the human being as a natural creature and the human being as a maker of history. The basis and principles of interpretation used by Hegel to determine the natural / physical structures of continents and the possibilities they offer for the historical advancement of humanity can be summed up into:

(1) the perception of continents and the geographic entities,

(2) the basic significance of the relationship between solid forms and liquid forms (i.e .between land continents and water bodies)

(3) the historical and geographical significance of the contacts between the East and West, and

(4) the inverse relationship between the degree of dependence on nature and the level of civilization

These bases and principles of interpretation constitute a part of the logical and dialectical framework of the Hegelian philosophy which presupposes

conformity between the physical structure and the national personality (spirit) although history to him is a continuous and mounting liberation of people from their natural environments. Hegel explains this liberation process or the emergence of the spirit from nature as an example of a dialectical relationship.

Marx(1904), on his part, acknowledges the natural basis of every single historical and social phenomenon, and considers nature itself as a form of historical and social subject . Despite his true contention of the temporal priority of 'external nature', he has not attributed the historical evolution (i.e the advancement of society) to any extra – historical or extra – social factors. Rather, it is attributed to nature which has been modified and reshaped by historical and social processes, i.e. by the development of material production which has been historically and socially conditioned. Geography to Marx is thus constituted by two different, but inseparable and mutually modifying aspects: the history of nature and the study of people. He rejects all these concepts addressing the relationship between nature and people in a materialistic and deterministic way from Montesquieu's environmental historicism and natural historicism to all forms of Hegelian idealism, stressing that nature should be regarded as a specific stage of social production.

So, and despite their differences, the three philosophers have come to grip with the logical and methodological fact concerning the 'unity of opposites' as a fundamental law of the dialectic, i.e. the unity of nature and history، of the physical and the human، of freedom and necessity, of the pragmatic and the speculative, and of existence and thought.

MAN – NATURE DIALECTIC:

The core subject matter of geography is the relationship between people and their natural environments. Stress should be made here on our contention that human beings and nature are inseparable, and are part of each other. It is impossible to define one except in relation to the other. Nature is not a sheer stock of economic goods, as presented by the techno centric view. It is rather a social category. It is true that there was (in the distant past) an objective nature, but it has been since then reshaped and reconditioned by one aspect of its own self: the human society. Purely natural (first) nature is rare in our contemporary world, and where it does exist, it is highly artificial as a piece of 'nature' withdrawn from that natural order in which human transformative activity plays such a decisive role.

Human existence is an intentional, purposeful and continuous endeavour to mold and reshape nature to the extent that we cannot imagine a concept of nature in separation of human attempts to control nature. On the other hand, this continuous human endeavour to control nature pre-requires a natural domain for the activation of this consciousness, and any material human action cannot be accomplished except in conformity with the physical and chemical laws of nature (Eltayeb, 1995: 45). Or as Pepper(1993 :107-8) puts it, humans and nature are each other : what people do is natural while nature is socially produced; they constantly interpenetrate and interact in a circular and mutually affecting relationship. Nature, and perceptions of it affect and change human society: the latter changes nature: nature, changed, affects society to further change it, and so on .Through this mutual transformation (human – nature dialectic) people do not only change nature through production,

but also change human nature, i.e. themselves; through learning how to farm nature's products, people have changed themselves from nomadic gatherers and hunters to sedentary cultivators, and to an industrial society when they acquired the ability to manufacture things, again using nature's products .Nomadic, agriculturalist, and industrial societies, and their individual members are qualitatively different.

This interaction is not only material. Through changing nature and making things out of nature, people have changed themselves into creatures who can appreciate the beauty of things they make, e.g. architectural constructions, machines and instruments, i.e. they have developed their subjective senses, e.g. their feelings, emotions and intelligence. Their imagination has been enlarged by science and technological innovations which they have engineered using natural element: photography enhances people's appreciation of pure form in nature, whereas films create in symbolic form a distant world which is beyond people's perception (Pepper, 1993:112).

The driving force of this metabolic nature – society interaction is the labour process in which human beings incorporate their own essential forces into natural things, like natural raw material, which thereby gain some quality as use values; so nature is humanized while people are naturalized (Smith, 1984:16). It is labour through which exchange of matter between man and his natural environment takes place, and which regulates and controls this process of exchange . This interaction leads, through material production, to a social process which incorporates two dialectically – linked trends : a positive trend linked with the possibility of satisfying the material and spiritual needs of the individual, and a negative trend leading to the intensification of pressure on the natural

environment. These two trends are shaped and conditioned by soci – economic conditions of social development.

The dialectical relationship – or contradiction within unity – between the human and the natural can also be presented as between production and consumption. In order to survive people have produce to satisfy their needs and wants through direct consumption which is the final stage of the production process since the value of any produce is realized only when it is consumed. But the production process itself needs the availability and consumption of the tools of production, primary materials and human energy. This consumption is , therefore, a productive consumption. At the same time, direct consumption appears as production, specifically the production of the human race. This is, therefore, consumptive production. Thus, the general cases of this interaction reveal that production is at the same time consumption, and that consumption is at the same time production, and that production leads to consumption, and consumption leads to production, i.e. each of them is realized through the other. This interaction leads to the continuous development of the chain: production / consumption/ production ... and so on, in an endless self- renewing process. Furthermore .production does not only satisfy the present needs and wants، but also creates new needs and wants. Likewise،consumption does not only encourage the continuation of current production، but also sets the stage for the emergence of new types of production which contribute to the endless nature of this process (Eitayeb.1995:47).

THE SOCIO __ SPATIAL DIALECTIC

Space is a very central concept in geography. The basis of its conceptualization in main - stream geography refers back to Kant to whom the (geographical) world is comprised of 'things – in – themselves' which engender in us sensations out of which order is created by human sensibility and intuition; the sensation and its ordering are combined in the 'phenomenon' which intercedes between the 'things — in — themselves' and the conceptual discourse. To him, space and time are not just simple categories pf experience, but are two 'pure forms' of intuition, pre—given not in external nature but in the human ability to perceive, a 'pure form of the mind' (Kant, 1919:17). This conception has been built upon by Hartshorne to whom the regional (spatial) entities which we construct are in the full sense ' mental constructions'; they are entities only in our thoughts even though we find them to be constructions that provide some sort of intelligent basis for organizing our knowledge of reality (Hartshorne, 1939:275): This concept of the region (space), as Smith acknowledges, embodies a pure expression of absolute space, an absolute field of experience, a coordinate (along with time) for ordering reality; events, objects and processes do not constitute space, but happen 'in space'. (Smith, 1989:97).

This paper would rather argue that space is social in essence since material production (man – nature interaction) is a social process, occurring at a certain stage of social development, and always implying associations among social individuals that have evolved through time and over space. As Soja (1978:10) rightly observes, that the social nature of production means that geographical apace is not simply contextual, existential or geometrical; rather, it is social. Organized space is not an

entity which is independent of the social relations of production, and does not have its own laws of internal transformation. The spatial organization of human societies and economies is thus not an object itself or for itself, but, instead, is an inextricable part of the social matrix.

Geographical space is a social product, full of political and ideological meaning, manipulated to maintain or transform the social relations of production. Lefebvre (1976:; 8) emphasizes that : **'Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be 'purely' formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the land scape. Space has been shaped and molded from historic and natural elements, but this has been a political process. It is a product literally filled with ideologies",**

Physical geographic space cannot have an independent effect except in so far as it is related to particular substances or media through which energy can be transmitted (Sack, 1980:58). This relational concept of space shows how space is inextricably intertwined with substance. Such an embedding of space with substance does not make space an independent force, but rather an equal partner in constituting force.

Other social scientists have used imagery to express the social nature of space. Valentine (1999:47-49) quotes Edward Said (Orientalism, 1978) 'Just as we make our own histories, so too we make our own geographies ... space becomes endowed with meaning. 'He also quotes Merleau-Ponty (The phenomenology of perception, 1962) 'The body is the

geography closest in '. and it is therefore the first space that we imagine and endow with meaning. The body is the original subject that constitutes space; that there would be no space without the body ... Through movement and orientation we create a link with our bodies and the outlying space, so that we organize our surrounding space as a continual extension of our own being. One's being in space is one's identity which is a form of subject position in which the individual thinks along socio-economic lines. Using this perspective, identity is constituted out of social positions, and the individual's spatial space, e.g. workplace and residence, is largely determined by his social place (identity)

Massey (1999:283) addresses space from the multiplicity perspective. To her:

'Space is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of more than one voice. Without space multiplicity would be impossible. Moreover, the converse is also the case : Without multiplicity there can be no space ... (space) is the product of interrelations and interactions. It is not coherent. Multiplicity and space are co-constitutive. Space is socially constituted. It is the product of the intricacies and the complexities, the interlocking and the non- inter lockings, of relations from the imaginably cosmic to the intimately tiny. And precisely because it is the product of relations, relations which are active practices, material and embedded, practices which have to be carried out· space is always in the process of becoming. It is always being made. It is always therefore also in a sense unfinished.'

HOMOGENIZATION – DIFFERENTATION DIALECTIC

The organization of geographical space. which is the outcome of the interaction between man and nature and among people, reflects the tendencies of expansion and concentration which in turn, reflects the geographical and social movement of capital.

The two processes of spatial expansion and geographical or localized concentration of capital in the process of production are not unrelated. On the contrary, they do not only function simultaneously but are two dialectically related aspects of the same process of the accumulation of capital. On the one hand, the geographical expansion of capital tends to homogenize geographical apace by diffusing the dominant capitalist mode of production into all sectors of the national economy and by equalizing the rate of profit in all geographical units and in every branch of the economy. On the other hand, the spatially localized concentration of capital tends to differentiate the rates of profit (Eltayeb, 1989:177).

These two processes of homogenization and differentiation, which are dialectically linked, are two inseparable moments of the process of capitalist accumulation. With the geographical self-expansion of capital- the spatial spread of the different branches of capitalist production – the tendency to uniformity (homogenization) seems to be dominant; but this geographical expansion of capital takes place in such a way that new conditions of production and exchange are constantly being created, giving rise to differentiation. The essence of capitalist production is that the tendency toward equalization is immediately checked by the differentiation of the conditions of production and exchange. and thus the tendency to homogenization leads to the creation of conditions of differentiation (Palloix, 1977:3)

The contradiction between homogenization and differentiation in the development of the forces of production (and particularly in the rate of profit) is a major contradiction in the process of the capitalist accumulation of capital, and is rooted in the contradiction of labour and capital which defines the capitalist mode of production. While the development of competitive capitalist forms of production tends to create equalization in the rate of profit (and generally, in the conditions of production and exchange), the expanded reproduction of capital under monopoly capitalism (which is being consolidated by the ongoing processes of globalization) depends on the extraction of super profits (i.e. more than the average) which in turn requires sectoral and / or spatial differentiation (Soja, 1978:21)The dialectical relationship and the dynamic contradiction between homogenization and differentiation are the mechanisms which sustain geographically uneven development which constitutes the necessary condition for the expanded reproduction of capital. Some geographical unevenness is a natural outcome of every social process, but the capitalist mode of production not only presupposes geographical unevenness but actively creates, intensifies and seeks to maintain spatial and sectoral inequalities for its very survival. At the same time the continuing geographical expansion of capitalism is accompanied by countervailing tendencies toward increasing homogenization and reducing geographical disparities (*loc. cit*).

The process of uneven geographical development and the dialectical relationship between homogenization and differentiation give rise to the tension and opposition between the dominant centers of production, accumulation and exploitation, on the one hand, and the subordinate,

dependent, exploited geographical areas, on the other hand. According to Mandel (1978:85):

'....even in the ideal case of homogeneous beginning capitalist economic growth, expanded reproduction an accumulation of capital are ... still synonymous with the juxtaposition and constant combination of development and underdevelopment. The accumulation of capital itself produces development and underdevelopment as mutually determining moments of the uneven and combined movement of capital. The lack of homogeneity is a necessary outcome of the unfolding laws of the motion of capital itself '

CONCLUSION

The ongoing processes of globalization do not mean only the internationalization of the market at the geographical level, but also the intensification of the capitalist relations of production between labour and capital at the social level as well as between the cores and the peripheries of the world system. Thus the objective apprehension of current geographical phenomena and relations would require an illuminating understanding of the contemporary stage of capitalism, particularly in terms of its historic mission (objectives), philosophy, ideology (social theories. concepts, values,.....etc) , technological innovation, and institutions. Dialectics provide a useful tool for such an understanding, and hence for objective geographical inquiry. Furthermore, and in a world system which is grossly unjust, dialectics provide a powerful tool to develop a geography that would strive at spatial and social justice, to borrow peppers (1993) words.

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