



Understanding and explanation. Paul Ricœur and human geography

Paolo Furia¹

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to put Ricœur’s philosophy in dialogue with human geography. There are at least two good reasons to do so. The first concerns the epistemological foundation of geography: Whereas humanistic or phenomenological geographers inspired by Heidegger or, to a lesser extent, by Merleau-Ponty have sometimes taken on an anti-scientific approach, the Ricœurian articulation of understanding and explanation may contribute to building a bridge between the experiential side of place-meanings and the scientific explanations of spatial elements and their relationships. The second reason has to do with the application of the Ricœurian “model of the text” to landscape: It is a direction that Ricœur never explicitly took, but it is worth exploring, especially considering that “landscape as a text” was quite a popular metaphor among human geographers in the 1980s and 1990s. In this paper I will discuss both issues in order to outline a “Ricœurian path to geography,” which, while never explicitly developed by the philosopher, may represent an innovative and fruitful actualization of his thought.

Keywords Epistemology · Explanation · Phenomenology · Text · Understanding

1 Ricœur and human geography: a promising dialogue

Paul Ricœur and geography have rarely crossed paths. Despite Ricœur’s undeniable commitment to social sciences, his thought does not often touch upon issues connected to geography, its tasks and objectives as a science, its main concepts and its epistemology. There are philosophical reasons for this. Almost every trait of Ricœur’s philosophical thought revolves around time rather than space: from his criticism of structuralism in linguistics and cultural anthropology to his theory of narration, from his endeavor to salvage consciousness from radical deconstruction

✉ Paolo Furia
paolo.furia@unito.it

¹ Dipartimento Di Filosofia E Scienze Dell’Educazione, Università Degli Studi Di Torino, Torino, Italy

to his later work on memory and recognition. This is not to affirm that Ricœur completely ignores spatial issues. For instance, in *Freedom and Nature* Ricœur discusses embodiment and movement and their links to spatiality and the world of objects. However, in that work, Ricœur's argument can be seen to move from spatiality to temporality. The same movement occurs in *Time and Narrative III's* reappraisal of Koselleck's *space of experience* and *horizon of expectation*. Time always takes on a more prominent role than space; as a consequence, human geography is far less important in Ricœur's interdisciplinary dialogues than history. According to the cultural geographer Ed Soja, Ricœur's approach to space is broadly based on the Bergsonian assumption that space is "something fixed, lifeless, immobile, a mere background or stage of the human drama, an external and eternal complication of our own choosing."¹ Ricœur "filled his approach to narrativity with subtly double-coded terms and concepts which, in French and English, resound with ambivalent spatial and temporal meanings: plot, emplotment, configuration, world, trope, trajectory, peripeteia, time-span, story-line": Soja would like to "believe that Ricœur was aware of the pronounced spatiality of time that rings in these terms and concepts."²

Although there is no evidence that Ricœur ever read these notes by Soja, a couple of years later he published his first paper explicitly devoted to space, *Architecture and Narrativity*. The aim here was the transposition onto the architectural plane of the threefold *mimesis* developed in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*: prefiguration, configuration, refiguration. Later still, in *Memory History Forgetting*, Ricœur returned to the question and offered a new interpretation of space based on three axes: first, a phenomenology of place, based on the acknowledgment of the original spatiality of the lived body; second, a hermeneutics of built spaces, which takes up the ideas already expressed in *Architecture and Narrativity* about building as the act of inscribing something new into the lived space. Third, "a higher level of rationalization of place, which we might call the axis of a long duration geo-politics of inhabited land."³ Each axis makes up the object of a specific discipline. Phenomenology deals especially with the ground level of human experience, which takes into account the basic lived spatiality of the body and its role in the constitution and reproduction of places. Architecture comes into play when the act of building makes the object of a specific and relatively autonomous research. According to this second axis, the lived body does not constitute places in the first instance; rather, it wanders through already built environments which set limits and constraints on subjective experience: At this stage, the objectivity of the lifeworld is clearly stated. With the third axis, then, geography makes its appearance as a "rationalization of places," which allows one to explain them by considering the historical processes that produce them and the spatial relations between their anthropic and natural elements.⁴ Ultimately, we get an idea of what geography is, what it does and what it is for, in Ricœur's thought. Nevertheless, even in *Architecture and Narrativity* and *Memory*,

¹ Soja (1996, p. 169).

² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³ Umbelino (2017, p. 235).

⁴ Ricœur (2004, p. 151).

History, Forgetting, spatial issues are always set in relation to the allegedly wider problems of memory and time.

In more recent years, scholars have begun to investigate possible connections between Ricœur's philosophy and space, place, and other geographical concepts. Purcell has attempted to combine Ricœur's work with Enrique Dussel's by focusing on "largely latent" issues of space and dwelling connected to narrativity.⁵ Umbelino affirms that "Ricœur offers us decisive suggestions for how to conceive of a hermeneutic account of human space" and aims to continue exploring this perspective "with Ricœur, but also beyond Ricœur."⁶ Gschwandtner acknowledges that the philosopher "focuses far more extensively on the topic of time in many of his works," but considers it promising to "make conscious use of his ideas and philosophical methodology in order to articulate certain insights about the intersection of hermeneutics and space/place."⁷ The aim of my paper is to put Ricœur's philosophy in dialogue with human geographers, whose main task is precisely to explore the relationship between people and their environments. This dialogue may prove useful to philosophy, primarily because debates in human geography about how to conceive space, place and their relation to culture and society are explicitly connected to philosophical questions. As geographer Tim Cresswell puts it:

How is human life related to the natural world? What are the significant differences between places? How is the particular related to the general and universal? While not being quite at the level of 'what is the meaning of life?' these are nonetheless profound questions that demand answers that are equally geographical and philosophical.⁸

Therefore, it is not at all uncommon for geographers to use philosophical theories to underpin this or that interpretation of the relationship between man and geographical environments.

Ricœur's philosophical thought does not have the same impact on human geography as Heidegger's or Merleau-Ponty's. Nevertheless, many geographers allude to this or that element of Ricœur's thought in relation to specific aspects of their own theories. They have referred to Ricœur as concerns the phenomenological contribution to environmental psychology, the notion of space–time distanciation, the articulation of explanation and understanding in geographical theory, and qualitative methods in empirical research.⁹ It is quite noteworthy that references to Ricœur's thought are to be found outside the framework of so-called phenomenological, or humanistic, geography. For instance, geographer Derek Gregory found it useful to refer to Ricœur's notion of distanciation to underpin a rather constructivist notion of social space, which shifts away from a more phenomenological understanding of geography. The reasons of this rather eclectic use of Ricœur in the context of human

⁵ Purcell (2010, p. 289).

⁶ Umbelino (2017, p. 234).

⁷ Gschwandtner (2017, p. 170).

⁸ Cresswell (2013, p. 15).

⁹ Seamon (1982), Gregory (1989), Entrikin (1991), Pile (1990).

geography may depend on his peculiar manner of interpreting phenomenology and its relationship with science. My discussion will start by summarizing the confrontation, which took place in the second half of the last century, between two conflicting approaches to human geography: the positivist one, according to which space is nothing but sheer objective extension suitable for quantitative research on the part of a detached Cartesian subjectivity; and the humanistic one, according to which the human subject is always embodied and emplaced, and, in turn, places always display qualitative features and meanings which render them unique. Each of these two approaches entails a very different interpretation of the relationship between space, place and people; but, considered in their purest form, both prove to be unilateral and inadequate. I will show how Ricœur's stance may prove useful to build a bridge between them, with a view to attaining a richer and better-grounded understanding of the relationship between space, place and people.

2 Positivism in geography

In order to correctly understand the contribution of Ricœur's thought to the epistemology of geography, it may be useful to examine why both positivist and humanistic geographies of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s represent unilateral views exposed to the risk of canceling each other out. To put it bluntly, positivist geography only emphasizes the distancing between the detached eye of the subject and the merely objective dimensionality of space, whereas humanistic (or phenomenological) geography has often focused just on the dimension of co-belonging of people and place.¹⁰ In the following pages, I will firstly describe the main characteristics of twentieth-century positivist geography; then I will show how a humanistic trend based on phenomenological presuppositions has emerged in reaction to the positivist standpoint.

According to geographer John Pickles, "under the influence of positivism the modern human sciences have consciously cut themselves off from their historical tradition."¹¹ Natural science criteria for acquiring and testing knowledge have been taken as a standard for social sciences as well. Geography underwent significant change in this direction with the birth of quantitative geography between the 1950s and 1960s. Before then, geography was mainly conceived of in terms of regional description ("chorology") and as an idiographic discipline concerned with

¹⁰ Objectivism and subjectivism are not the only available epistemologies for human geography, of course. This juxtaposition overlooks other geographical epistemologies characterized by a relational concept of both space and place, such as for example Marxist geographies (see Harvey 1973, Massey 1994), postmodern geographies (Soja 1989), and feminist ones (Rose 1993). Non-representationalist geographers (Lorimer 2005, Thrift 2007) go beyond both the idiographic stability of place and the mathematical abstraction of space by emphasizing the spatial dimension of practices, where both space and place find their open and ongoing realization. Nonetheless, it is a fact that all these approaches are a response to a somehow intuitive and often taken-for-granted distinction between objective space, suitable for scientific inquiry, and subjective place, qualified by unicity and particularity, as maintained by authors such as Agnew (2011), Low (2013), and Cresswell (2013) – a distinction whose onset can be identified in the epistemological debates between positivism and humanism in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

¹¹ Pickles (1985, p. 19).

the singularities of places and landscapes. The qualitative character of geography began to appear insufficient at the beginning of the 1950s: “In science such a fixation on the singular, the unique, the particular, is absurd. These fixations might make interesting accounts in the humanities but they would not constitute science.”¹² The earlier interpretation of geography as an idiographic discipline, which saw the qualities and characteristics of different regions as unique and irreducible, was thus branded as “intellectually inadequate.”¹³ A new generation of post-Second World War geographers gave itself the aim of providing the discipline with a more stable and better-defined scientific status. More traditional idiographic approaches defined the task of geography as follows: “Geography is concerned to provide accurate, orderly, and rational description and interpretation of the variable character of the earth’s surface.”¹⁴ The discipline was reformulated in nomothetic terms as follows: “Geography can be regarded as a science concerned with the rational development, and testing of theories that explain and predict the spatial distribution and location of various characteristics on the surface of the earth.”¹⁵ Quantitative geographers believed that geography could finally reach its positive stage through quantitative methods, spatial rationalizations, and objective mapping.

Tim Cresswell, following Derek Gregory, outlines five principles which form the ground of positivist geography: first, scientific geography must be based on an observable and quantifiable reality—it presupposes the notion of the objective dimensionality of space; second, an appropriate scientific approach must exclude unobservable, unmeasurable forces as explanations of geographical objects and phenomena; third, verifiable theories are required—there is no space for value judgements; fourth, scientific geography must be useful and potentially applicable (a principle which quickly turned into the following: Technological and practical applicability is the primary aim of spatial theory); and fifth, knowledge is an ongoing process in which future discoveries may correct prior theoretical understandings. Based on these assumptions, geography turns into “spatial theory.” Through a broad application of mathematical and statistical tools, graph theory, and—more recently—sophisticated network analysis, where places are treated as nodes occupying certain positions in space, geography has become an advanced and somewhat trendy positivist science that seeks the general and overlooks the particular. Quantitative methods are important in geography, as in other social sciences, for they are likely to have an impact on the policy-making level. But how are we to assess the quality of this impact? According to some scholars, spatial theory has often produced “a number of mistakes also in practises and thus leads to irrational land uses.”¹⁶ More than once, architectural or planning projects that seemed quite efficient on paper have turned out to be dangerous for ecosystems or a threat to local cultures. The apparent rationality of spatial theories may also serve irrational

¹² Cresswell (2013, p. 80).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴ Hartshorne (1959, p. 21).

¹⁵ Yeates (1968, p. 10).

¹⁶ Mazúr (1983, p. 140).

or unjust purposes. As Pickles puts it: “Method and technique become arbiters of social understanding and truth, instead of establishers of certainty. In that move extra-scientific forms of knowing and dwelling in and with the world are relegated to secondary positions. From this point on we begin to live in a world where man is patterned as machine, information processor, or gene pool. When such reductions occur, not only do we run the danger of forgetting the nature of human being, but science itself can no longer say anything at all about human experience as such.”¹⁷ In other words, positivist geography meets natural science standards of scientificity by giving up geography’s connection to lived experience: “A form of geographic reductionism is developed, which I will call ‘spatialism,’ where the world is reduced to and explained only in terms of the methodological perspectives consistent with a science of space and spatial relations.”¹⁸ The dismissal of descriptive methods aimed at highlighting the qualitative characters of places implies the conceptualization of a “primordial physical space to which subjective meanings and subjective spaces accrue (...) a Newtonian space, structured primarily according to Euclidean principles.”¹⁹ In the positivist framework, space is mostly understood as a neutral background for the action of social forces, and places are reduced to mere locations identified through objective spatial coordinates on the x and y axes. The philosopher Ed Casey reconnects the absolute space postulated by quantitative geography to its Cartesian roots: “Extension (*extensio*) is the core concept in Descartes’s view of space.”²⁰ Absolute space lay at the basis of what has been called the “cartography of objectivism, which claimed to disclose a fundamental and enduring geometry underlying the apparent diversity and heterogeneity of the world.”²¹ But extended space, from a Cartesian perspective, is nothing but the object of the detached gaze of a non-extended subject. The philosophical presupposition of positivism in twentieth-century geography is still the Cartesian opposition between subject and object. It must be said that the Cartesian subjectivity presupposed by geographical positivism is usually implicit. The objectivity of geometrical space is not acknowledged as a rationalist abstraction, but is rather understood in realist terms. The idea is that spatial reality as such can be mathematized and that the actual relations between its parts can be rationally discovered or established. Through this naive form of realism, it seems possible to split reality into two dimensions: a primary one, which makes the object of scientific investigation, and a secondary one, which is perceived in experiences and aesthetic judgments and constitutes the object of the humanities. It is in this very divorce of science and experience that Cartesian remnants lurk, together with all the well-known dualisms of modern thought. The adoption of an overtly humanistic standpoint in geography is primarily due both to many scholars’ dissatisfaction with the narrowness of a “spatialist” approach and to their concern about the possible unethical or dangerous consequences of a blind positivist attitude.

¹⁷ Pickles (1985, p. X).

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 41–42.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 26–27.

²⁰ Casey (1997, p. 54).

²¹ Gregory (1994, p. 70).

3 Humanistic geography

Humanistic geography emerged during the 1960s as a reaction against the positivist attitude of academic geography that had been predominant since the 1950s. A phenomenological basis for geography began to be claimed in both European and American contexts in different forms: from the early insights about dwelling and being in a geographical world of Le Lannou and Dardel to the ideas of “geographical consciousness,” “topophilia,” and “immediate experience of the world.”²² Geographers such as Ed Relph and Anne Buttimer followed Heidegger in rejecting the Western scientific approach—seen as aimed at the mastering and domination of nature—in the name of an “environmental humility”²³ characterized by respect for the uniqueness of places and their living communities. Heidegger’s philosophical stance provides geographers with much food for thought, not only with respect to its epistemological criticism of modern scientism, but also because it fosters the elaboration of an ontological perspective on mortals and place. In *Building Dwelling Thinking*, the philosopher establishes the priority of authentic dwelling over rational acts of building. Dwelling involves the always emplaced interplay of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, what Heidegger calls “the fourfold”: “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth (...). To be a human being means to be on the earth as mortal. It means to dwell.”²⁴ Heidegger’s peculiar brand of phenomenology has been of great inspiration for the phenomenological trend in geography. As geographers Cloke, Philo and Sadler affirmed: “Heidegger’s philosophy challenges us to rethink the whole human geography in a manner that sees space, place, and environment as profoundly implicated in the biggest philosophical question about the very Being of both human beings and everything else accessible to human thoughts and actions.”²⁵ Other phenomenological geographers such as David Seamon or, more recently, Kristen Simonsen have taken into deeper account the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy of perception and embodiment explicitly implies a focus on spatial movement and experience. For Seamon, a phenomenological geography “asks the significance of people’s inescapable immersion in a geographical world.”²⁶ In his seminal book *A Geography of the Lifeworld*, he introduced a telling aesthetic metaphor to express the interanimation of lived bodies and places: the place-ballet metaphor. More recently, Seamon has defined place-ballet as “an interaction of individual bodily routines rooted in a specific environment that often becomes an important place of interpersonal and communal exchange, meaning, and attachment.”²⁷ The typical routines regularly performed in a place define its very character and atmosphere. Merleau-Ponty’s popularity among phenomenological geographers is due to the fact that his philosophy provides human

²² See Van Paassen (1957), Tuan (1974), and Relph (1976).

²³ Relph (1981, p. 156).

²⁴ Heidegger (1971, p. 141).

²⁵ Cloke et al., (1991, p. 80).

²⁶ Seamon (1980, p. 148).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

geography with: “a reconception of what constitutes the human subject through a focus on body-subjects that respond contextually and preconsciously through their sensible actions, rather than mental subjects who cognitively interpret space and then proceed to act in ways that are based on these cognitive interpretations.”²⁸ In other words, Merleau-Ponty provides geographers with a notion of post-Cartesian, embodied subjectivity which allows them to overcome the subject-object opposition at the basis of the positivist and quantitative trends in geography.

At this point, it may be useful to take into consideration some objections raised against humanistic geography. The most trustworthy collector of criticisms against early humanistic geography is Pickles. He is confident that phenomenology has a positive influence on geography, yet also believes that it must be freed from certain misinterpretations to be found in the arguments by 1970s and 1980s humanistic geographers. Firstly, Pickles affirms that it is important to distinguish phenomenology from humanism. Of course, the introduction of phenomenological principles into geography is strictly related to the urge to save human geography from scientism; humanism nevertheless remains an attitude, whereas phenomenology is a method, the principles of which must be effective regardless of the adoption of a humanistic attitude. Confusion between humanism and phenomenology is encouraged by a lack of clarification of the methodical and foundational character of the phenomenological *démarche*. In their focus on human experience and place-meanings, humanist geographers such as Tuan and Buttimer claim to be inspired by phenomenology, but as a matter of fact they draw on a distillation of several positions—including strong influences from *Lebensphilosophie*—sharing a basic rejection of positivistic methodologies. On the contrary, phenomenology must be understood, in all its different forms, as a method through which to return to “things themselves” by means of a peculiar reduction of the world based on the natural attitude which allows to problematize its taken-for-grantedness. As a consequence, phenomenology must be understood more as a way to reconnect objective science to its experiential ground, than as a sort of antidote to science. This is the second claim that Pickles makes: It is important not to identify phenomenological geography with non-scientific (or even anti-scientific), purely qualitative and descriptive geography. A phenomenological geographer may fight against objectivism, but not against objectivation in science; thus, another thing that a phenomenological geographer should not do is to simply oppose explanation—made possible by distanciation—to those forms of immediate understandings deriving from the mutual belonging of people and places.

What Pickles fails to acknowledge is that a certain anti-scientific attitude on the part of humanist geographers actually stems from Heidegger’s peculiar interpretation of phenomenology, especially considering his writings from the *The Age of the World Picture* onward. Pickles, along with many others, seems to be confident that, by drawing on Heidegger’s perspective, it would be possible to avoid both objectivism and subjectivism and to define the ontological source of geographical science. This path has actually been followed by philosophers such as Jeff Malpas, who have

²⁸ Ash, Simpson (2016, p. 4).

devoted to Heidegger and his ontological topography quite a large number of articles and books. Now, while it must be acknowledged that Heidegger provides a sound ontological foundation for geography, which prevents it from foundering into modernist dichotomies (subject vs. object, culture vs. nature, science vs. experience), it is highly disputable that his ontological *démarche* solves the problem of reconnecting experience with science. This does not mean that a Heideggerian standpoint necessarily rejects science in the name of original belonging. But it is a fact that much clearer and sounder words on the issue, albeit less known ones in the field of human geography, have been spoken by Ricœur.

4 Ricœur's dialectics of explanation and understanding

Ricœur develops a hermeneutical reinterpretation of phenomenology to avoid an undesirable consequence of a certain common interpretation of phenomenology: idealism. According to the French philosopher, the Husserlian transcendental subjectivity affirmed in the *Nachwort to Ideen I* and the *Cartesian Meditations* does not sufficiently take into account the ontological condition of understanding. A hermeneutical reinterpretation of phenomenology is therefore needed, in order to grasp the primitive condition of understanding. Ricœur, clearly influenced by Gabriel Marcel's own interpretation of phenomenology, affirms that "this ontological condition can be expressed as finitude (...) it designates, in negative terms, an entirely positive condition which would be better expressed by the concept of belonging."²⁹ Hermeneutic phenomenology, inaugurated by Heidegger, represents for Ricœur a way to develop a non-idealist and non-subjectivist interpretation of intentionality. It is very important to underline that, from this perspective, intentionality is prior to the subject/object opposition: In other words, relation comes first and establishes its subjective and objective poles dynamically. Understanding is the ontological condition of the phenomenological subject, who should lose the attribute "subject" to be named differently: *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world, as suggested by Heidegger, or simply "belonging," following Gadamer. But two interpretations of the philosophical hermeneutics project are possible at this point: It is possible either to withdraw the expressions subject and object completely, as referring to a modernist dualistic approach that is incompatible with the discovery of intentionality and the priority of belonging (or finitude) over subjectivity; or to free the expressions subject and object from their Cartesian cage and still use them in order to grasp a specific stage in the unfolding of belonging, once its poles (the self and the world) have been established. Here is where Heidegger and Ricœur's paths diverge: Whereas the former draws a contrast between ontological belonging and the alienating distancing of the self and the world, the latter acknowledges that the relation of belonging can be problematized and, by that very problematization, interrupted. The Heideggerian path "rightly stresses the interpretative nature of existence," but at the same time "it cuts itself off from the dialogue with the actual sciences of interpretation and

²⁹ Ricœur (1981, p. 65).

historical inquiry, often seeming to view them with disdain.”³⁰ This occurs because, by emphasizing the discovery of the original belonging, Heidegger overlooks the stage of distanciation, without which no scientific enterprise is possible. Ricoeur rejects the Heideggerian stance according to which belonging and distanciation are straightforwardly opposed and simply incompatible, as still suggested by the title of Gadamer’s masterwork *Truth or Method*. More specifically, the French philosopher does not agree with the idea that distanciation is “what renders possible the objectification which reigns in human sciences (...) but destroys the fundamental and primordial whereby we belong to and participate in the historical reality which we claim to construct as an object.”³¹ Another way to account for the antinomy of distanciation and belonging is suggested by the notion of text.

Text is important for it provides a model of the relationship between the self (authors, readers) and the world (its events and meanings), which encompasses both belonging and distanciation:

To interpret is to render near what is far (temporally, geographically, culturally, spiritually). In this respect, mediation by the text is the model of a distanciation which would not be simply alienating, like the *Verfremdung* which Gadamer combats throughout his work (...), but which would be genuinely creative.³²

As long as we are in principle immersed in discourse, we belong to a framework which allows us to understand the matter of the text, to be addressed by it. At the same time, text is a particular kind of discourse, characterized by an inscription of meaning into language. Ricoeur makes it clear that hermeneutics does not simply rely on the general category of *Verstehen* (understanding, comprehension), but “implies something more specific: It covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sort of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing.”³³ Text is possible only by virtue of a double process of distanciation. On the one hand, whereas spoken discourse depends to the dialogical context, text is detached from its original productive situation. Through the process of material fixation, meanings are inscribed into written words and sentences, and are thereby freed from the author’s intentions and psychology. On the other hand, text also interrupts the immediacy of the reader’s flow of experience, by presenting new and autonomous matters of reflection: “The matter of the text becomes my own only if I disappropriate myself, in order to let the matter of the text be. So, I exchange the me, master of itself, for the self, disciple of the text. The process could also be expressed as a distanciation of self from itself.”³⁴ This double distanciation (from the author, from the reader) is what makes Ricoeur’s approach to hermeneutics different both from the psychological hermeneutics typical of Romanticism

³⁰ Grondin (2015, p. 150).

³¹ Ricoeur (1981, p. 93).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

and from the more recent post-structuralist views of hermeneutics, which are rather focused on the reader's creative reception. In Ricœur's approach, belonging evolves into distanciation, which in turn can be overcome by progressive appropriations. It is through appropriation that a text, however methodically distanced in order to gain its objective structure, logical connections etc., comes to be meaningful for a reader: "By appropriation, I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself."³⁵ Appropriation is the stage of interpretation in which the meaning of a text, clarified through distanciation, becomes meaningful for a reader. By understanding a text, the reader is finally led toward self-understanding: This also means that appropriation confirms the initial belonging, which is made more informed and mindful through the test of distanciation. So, it is possible to affirm that belonging evolves into distanciation, but distanciation is a moment of the original belonging.

From an epistemological perspective, belonging corresponds to understanding and distanciation to explanation. Following Ricœur, a reinterpretation of the relationship between belonging and distanciation may be seen to entail a coherent revision of both understanding and explanation. At the beginning, with Dilthey, the opposition understanding/explanation served to separate two spheres of reality:

These two spheres are those of the natural sciences and the human sciences. Nature is the region of objects offered to scientific observation, a region subsumed since Galileo to the enterprise of mathematisation and since John Stuart Mill to the canons of inductive logic. Mind is the region of psychological individualities, into which each mental life is capable of transposing itself. Understanding is such a transference into another mental life.³⁶

Within this division, understanding receives "an intuitive and unverifiable character" and explanation finds itself "expelled from the field of the human sciences."³⁷ Halfway between the two dimensions there is interpretation: For although Dilthey places it firmly on the side of understanding, interpretation is not directed toward authors or artists' minds, but toward texts, symbols, and pictures, the meanings of which endure beyond the mental events from which they have originated. Ricœur insists that the interpretation of meanings is not at all an intuitive operation intended to retrieve the author's mental states, but rather takes the form of a methodic approach which includes an objectifying, explanatory moment. As a consequence, in Ricœur, explanation and understanding cease to separate nature and culture: In fact, explanation in historical and human sciences helps strengthen understanding, as the structural analysis of texts shows. Understanding, in turn, ceases to indicate the intuitional act of identification with another mind, and turns into the appropriation of meanings clarified by explanation. Understanding, that is, belonging, entails explanation, that is, distanciation.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

Now, it has to be acknowledged that in his articles from the 1960s and 1970s Ricœur's theory of text and the reformulation of explanation and understanding do not serve broader epistemological goals such as to redefine the regional ontologies of nature and culture, with their very problematic boundaries, or to address the relationship between the nomothetic and the idiographic in science. Nonetheless, Ricœur seeks to transcend the boundaries of textual hermeneutics by using text, understood as the locus where the dialectics of belonging and distanciation is mostly visible and operational, as a model for the investigation of human action in general. The article *The Model of the Text* clearly sets the stage for what has been called the *practical turn* in Ricœurian philosophy, generally dated to 1990 with the publication of *Oneself as Another*.³⁸ His declared intention is to apply the dialectics of belonging and distanciation (understanding and explanation) to meaningful action: "Meaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing."³⁹ By being objectified, action assumes a fixed character which allows the researcher to explain its hidden motives and meanings. What we have here is a sort of methodical interruption of the ongoing flow of experience to explain and eventually criticize it. Inquiring into action means dealing with it as if it were a text, available to readers, an operation that phenomenological approaches to human geography, especially Heideggerian ones, usually reject. Ricœur finds an ally in Anscombe and other post-Wittgensteinian authors who proposed a distinction between the "knowing how" of phenomenological and practical knowledge and "knowing that," where action is objectified in order to be explained.⁴⁰ Whereas in the former case action is interaction and can be considered an event, in the latter case action is framed within a structure of meanings which renders it relatively stable and understandable even for those who do not participate in the interactive situation. Action as an event unfolds in the temporal interplay of interaction, but the meaning of action may endure beyond the actual event in which action unfolds. This is why a phenomenological approach, focused on experience and action, must entail a social science which objectifies action in order to grasp its enduring meanings. The objectification of action is made possible by the very fact of distanciation: "In the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own."⁴¹ Furthermore, the autonomization of action is what makes people act in one way or another. Indeed, an action is chosen mostly because of its meaning within a given social context: A person claps her hands at the end of a marvelous theater performance because she has introjected the positive meaning of clapping hands in a social context. An embedded action is always the actual instantiation of autonomous and de-psychologized meanings. In this sense, it is not

³⁸ Jervolino (1993), Agis Villaverde (2012).

³⁹ Ricœur (1971, p. 97).

⁴⁰ Even though Ricœur acknowledged certain philosophical advancements in Anscombe's distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how, it must be remarked that he remained wholly critical of Anscombe's thesis, as according to him, it focused far too much on the *what* of action instead of on the *who* of action.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

incorrect to affirm that there is always something taken-for-granted in experience before critical scrutiny. The kind of immediate understanding of the world implied by human action and experience requires the clarification of explanation, otherwise there is the risk that understanding be identified with uncritical belonging to the prevailing cognitive schemas and images in society. In other words, explanation inserts into experience a critical moment which is especially necessary in order to reinstate a positive and non-reactionary notion of belonging. Therefore, even in the case of action, the distinction between understanding and explanation is not a simple opposition. There is no reason to counterpose them, as often occurs in human sciences, where phenomenologists, by concentrating just on action and intention, neglect the objective content of action, and structuralists, by reducing meanings to structures, overlook action, intention, and change. On the contrary, a well-grounded phenomenological model takes into account both action and meanings, the intersubjective and the objective, in their temporal interplay.

In Ricœur's model of the text, it is possible to glimpse a fairly straightforward way of making the transition from the question of the text and of action to that of place, space and landscape. The conceptualization of writing as the act of the material inscription of meaning does not lead merely to an understanding of action as both an event and meaning, i.e. as both belonging and distanciation. It also testifies to the embedded and emplaced nature of action itself. The material fixation of meanings is not just a temporal process, as Ricœur himself seems to assume. Before being fixed in time, the meanings of actions are fixed in space. It is even possible to argue that the kind of material fixation displayed in spaces, places and landscapes serves as a model for understanding textual fixation: Ricœur explicitly says that the "fleeting event" of a spoken discourse "surpasses itself in meaning," by lending itself to "material fixation."⁴² Meanings are not just mental objects, for their very origin is rooted in the act of material fixation. Text is a kind of materialization of meaning, namely a fixation of the fleeting event of verbal speech. Words are, so to say, the matter in which verbal meanings are inscribed and fixed; but in this act of inscription, meanings also acquire expressivity and effectiveness. Matter is something more than the passive receptacle of an otherwise already accomplished sphere of meanings. In the material act of meaning's fixation, matter is also the medium by which meaning is possible and becomes communicable. But if this applies to the matter of writings, it must also—and all the more so—apply to the matter of actions, that is, space. Space is made up of both events and meanings, as well as action understood according to Ricœur's perspective. Events have logical and ontological priority: In this sense, phenomenology restores the original scene in which space is given as the ineradicable correlate of experience. Space is first of all what makes human life, experience and action possible as such. Nevertheless, it is precisely by gaining experience of spaces that one realises at what point and to what extent space is always already there, showing both cosmic and anthropic traits, blended in an awesome variety of combinations. Real space is never empty, for it always bears the marks of prior dwellings, shapings and symbolizations. In this sense, space is made

⁴² Ibid., p. 94.

up of places: not just mere sites equipped with objective coordinates, but concretions of social meanings which have been fixed into the natural settings, realized by carving stones, building palaces, bridges and streets, deforesting or making gardens and fields out of woods. Landscape is how place, grasped in relation to its horizons and vanishing lines, appears to external senses: typically to sight, but not necessarily only sight.⁴³ Space, and hence places and landscapes, distanced as they are from their original scenes, show at every moment a number of meanings which are either taken for granted, implicit, or even lost. When we go into a garden we know how to behave there, because we understand the garden as a place created for our well-being, which also entails the reproduction of a natural spot in the middle of the city, with the aim of interrupting the bustle of urban life. By spending some quality time in a garden, we contribute to underpinning its nature as a garden: We, mostly unconsciously, put space into practice—in other words, we experience the landscape through acts of landscaping which continuously confirm and reaffirm its nature. This happens because we belong to space, place, and landscape, and from this belonging stems an immediate form of understanding which we live by. But if we wish to understand why the paths in our garden have been drawn in a particular way, or, for example, why our favourite tree receives a better treatment than other trees in the same garden, we have to switch from an *understand how* to an *explain why* attitude. We set our spatial object at a distance in order to grasp its hidden meanings. We do this in order to enrich our understanding of our surroundings and, through this, our self-understanding. Space, place and landscape are both the phenomenological ground of experience and the hermeneutical setting for methodical analysis. This is why they constitute the object of a discipline, namely geography, which requires both understanding and explanation to best express its full potential.

5 Human geography: between explanation and understanding

Ricœur's chasm between understanding and explanation applies most fittingly to human geography, in particular as regards the debate between quantitative, nomothetic approaches to space and the phenomenological rediscovery of lived places. The phenomenological co-belonging of people and place, far from being simply opposed to scientific objectification, evolves toward it insofar as belonging cannot be taken for granted and needs to be further investigated. There are situations, in people's experiences of geographical environments, in which these are constituted as objects of geographical inquiry. It happens in quite a wide range of circumstances: In everyday life, when, for instance, people need to know how to reach one place from another, or when they need to orient themselves in unknown environments; but also in scientific inquiries, for example when researchers investigate the relationships between a certain political, economic and even physical geography and the

⁴³ It is indeed possible to speak of soundscape (Murray 1977), but also of touchscape (Zinn 2013), tastescape (Zinn, 2013), and smellscape (Douglas Porteus 1985).

interplay of life and power which give shape to them.⁴⁴ Place, space, and landscape were objectified in geography long before positivism entered the discipline and have continued to be objectified well beyond the highly formalized case of quantitative geography. Scientific objectification in geography may serve explicit critical tasks: in some versions of Marxism, for instance, landscape is regarded as “a palimpsest whose ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ meanings can somehow be recovered with the correct techniques, theories, or ideologies.”⁴⁵ In this case, landscape is a scene for the application of what Ricœur has named the “hermeneutics of suspicion”⁴⁶: It is viewed as the observable tip of a greater iceberg, the invisible part of which is constituted by the underlying socioeconomic processes and conditions.

The first and inevitable form of objectification of space and places implied by geography is represented by maps. The very moment a child learns to draw a map of her everyday journey from home to kindergarten, her immediate and mostly unconscious experiential flow has been interrupted and the foundation stone of science has been laid. The commitment to draw leads the child to reflect on her geographical experience. Spatial displacement covers a distance which, in a more or less rough way, can be replicated on a sheet of paper. Space appears filled with landmarks which are considered worthy of depiction. A choice must be made about what elements deserve to be represented and how they must be reproduced, for maps cannot contain everything and cannot result in a perfect *mimesis* of spatial reality. The huge variety of maps which have been produced over the centuries is proof of the many kinds of objectifications realized by painters, travelers, traders, migrants, military officers, politicians, geographers and spatial scientists over time. Ricœur’s model of the text reminds us that experience must be objectified in order to be explained, and that explanation is part of understanding and belonging. Therefore, maps can be considered objectifications which stem from experience and again return to it. Maps derive their finite character from experience, which is always the experience of finite subjects living in a particular part of the world (Ricœur invites us to think of the immediate understanding of experience as finitude). Hence, there is no such thing as an absolute map, capable of perfectly reproducing the world.⁴⁷ Objectifications also vary with respect to their degree of formal purity and logical abstraction. An admirable convergence of aesthetic values and rigorous scientific method can be seen in Alexander von Humboldt’s illustrations and maps, recently collected in *An Atlas of Geographical Wonders: From Mountaintops to Riverbeds (historical maps and tableaux from the nineteenth century, includes maps by Alexander von Humboldt)*. At the basis of this outstanding convergence, there lies the idea that aesthetic experience contributes to achieving knowledge: It cannot be reduced to something that must be overcome in order to attain science, for experience rather anticipates knowledge and provides it with its sensible motives and ends. Moreover, the aesthetic

⁴⁴ Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996).

⁴⁵ Cosgrove, Daniels (1988, p. 8).

⁴⁶ Ricœur (2008, p. 33).

⁴⁷ A condition which, by the way, would not even be desirable, as Borges implies in his short story *On Exactitude in Science* (1946).

appreciation of landscape testifies to the qualitative and sensible nature of space and keeps this awareness alive throughout the scientific undertaking.⁴⁸

Positivism begins when maps are viewed as scientific only inasmuch as they are stripped of any aesthetic elements. The mathematization of space triggered by quantitative geography has produced a divorce between the experiential and the scientific. Ed Casey explains that divorce as follows:

Cartography has become increasingly rigorous and demanding, to the point that the pictographic and topographic elements that were such important features of earlier maps (e.g., in late medieval portolan charts and in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch world maps) have been virtually eliminated. Even the purely decorative components of maps, so widely employed in the most diverse cultural settings, have ceded place to strictly utilitarian symbols that have to do with the measurement of space rather than with the landscape of practical value, or with the detailed and precise surveyor's map. Nothing painterly in either case; indeed, nothing even ornamental.⁴⁹

The cartographic obsession, by some named *cartographic anxiety*, also discussed by geographers such as Massimo Quaini, Gunnar Olsson, and Franco Farinelli, is based on “an epistemology of viewer and world, subject and object, interiority and exteriority (...) which limits the theoretical and practical possibilities of cartography itself.”⁵⁰ What must be rejected about the spatial analysis, quantitative geography and cartographic obsession developed under the wing of positivism is not the fact that they make extensive use of distanciation in order to turn the content of geographical experiences into detached objects with a view to explaining their causal connections and relations. Rather, it is the divorce between science and experience, implicit in the positivist interpretation of scientific objectifications, that must be rejected. Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology interprets explanation as a part of the lifeworld which is only relatively autonomous. Indeed, it leads to a double distanciation in geography: the map, in which spatial reality is represented as an object; and the critique of the map, through which the map itself becomes the object of critical inquiry. Ricœur's rejection of Cartesianism and positivism implies that geography must rethink its scientific objectifications and explanations as always partial and incomplete, and intrinsically conditioned by the finite condition of understanding. Pickles puts it as follows:

Mapping is an interpretative act, not a purely technical one, in which the product - the map - conveys not merely the facts but also and always the author's intention, and all the acknowledged and unacknowledged conditions and values any author (and his/her profession, time and culture) bring to a work. Thus, like all works, the map carries along with it so much more than the author intended. Also, like any text, the map takes on a life (and a context) of

⁴⁸ See Berleant (2010).

⁴⁹ Casey (2005, p. xiii).

⁵⁰ Pickles (2004, p. 28).

its own beyond the author's control. The map is a text, like any other in this regard, whose meaning and impact may go far beyond the limits of technique, the author's intention, and the mere transmittal of information.⁵¹

Pickles speaks about maps in almost the same terms used by Ricœur to speak about texts, despite the fact that references to the French philosopher are conspicuously lacking in most of Pickles' work.

It must be pointed out that in cartography, quantitative geography and spatial analysis, there has been a increase in hermeneutical awareness. Fotheringham, Brundson and Carlton acknowledge that in recent decades quantitative geography has undergone significant developments. Quantitative geography, they claim, no longer searches for the general by overlooking the particular. On the contrary, quantitative geographers are linked by "a simple belief that, in many situations, numerical data analysis or quantitative theoretical reasoning provides an efficient and generally reliable means of obtaining knowledge about spatial processes."⁵² Quantitative geography does not aim to produce "a flawless piece of research," but to sustain, confirm or falsify theories about spatial behaviors and phenomena through careful data collection and analysis. Among quantitative geographers there are of course positivists or naturalists, who believe in "global laws and global relationships," but there are also those who claim that "there are possibly no such entities."⁵³ And if this is so, then quantitative methods must be understood as a contribution to the task of understanding. Explanatory methodologies, far from being opposed to understanding, can be considered an important stage between an immediate, "naive" spatial experience and a critically informed understanding of the geographical lifeworld itself. In other words, Fotheringham, Brundson and Carlton promote quantitative methods in geography as a way to "explain more in order to understand better," according to Ricœur's famous adage. On the one hand, understanding encompasses explanation and connects it to its experiential sources of meaning. On the other hand, explanation strengthens and refreshes understanding. A way to express the same idea is to acknowledge that quantitative methods in geography lead to the development of critical narratives useful in both everyday life and political decision-making:

Another way to think of quantitative geography is about telling geographical stories with data. To speak of telling stories with data is neither to belittle the scientific value of data analysis nor to suggest the outcomes are a work of fiction. Instead, it is to recognize the creative processes that are used to take data in their raw form and turn them into statistical, graphical and cartographic outputs that are used to communicate a point of view, to illuminate an area of knowledge, to test ideas and to help make sense of the world around us. Good analysis has a narrative, a plot that the author wants the reader to engage with—a message to take away, to consider and to debate.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁵² Fotheringham, et al. (2000, p. 4).

⁵³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁴ Harris (2016, p. 23).

The finitude of understanding always influences both the onset and the conclusion of scientific inquiries. This does not mean that all interpretations are equally true. Methodologically rigorous data collection and analysis helps verify the plausibility each interpretation, in geography as well as in Ricœur's model of the text. Through explanation, it is possible to figure out what narratives deserve to be believed and sustained. In this sense, ill-intentioned researchers purposely foster bad explanations, and bad explanations usually fuel poor understanding:

It can be easy to deceive or to misinform with data. There are plenty of examples of terrible and misleading graphs (do a web search on bad or misleading graphs—you'll find many), of spurious statistics (try <http://tylervigen.com/spurious-correlations>) and of misunderstandings, mischief or blatant misuse of data (for examples of these see <http://www.badsience.net/>).⁵⁵

My final point is that the complementarity of explanation and understanding suits geography because of its controversial epistemological status. Caught as it is between the natural and the cultural, the descriptive and the imaginal, the nomothetic and the idiographic, geography was a puzzle for the whole modern era, which was largely grounded in these dichotomies. It may be inspiring to conclude this paper by retrieving some insights by classic geographers of the modern era about the synthetic nature of the geographical object. Vidal de la Blache defined geography as the “science of places,”⁵⁶ where places are considered to be areas marked by unique natural and human characteristics. According to Carl Sauer, geography's main concept is landscape: “An area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural.”⁵⁷ Hettner clarifies that geography “presupposes the general properties and processes of the earth, or accepts them from other sciences; for its own part, it is oriented about their varying areal expressions.”⁵⁸ This also means that geography is conceived of as an intrinsically non-reductionist discipline, for its characterizing object is landscape taken as a whole: not one or another element of the landscape, which can be separated from the rest and subsumed under a different explanatory order (vegetation under botany, the soil under pedology, animals under zoology, cities under urbanism or architecture), but landscape as a form which keeps together different kinds of elements and processes within a concrete and visible order. Among the forces shaping landscapes and governing their transformation we find both natural processes and socio-cultural phenomena and practices.

Geography challenges the division of the world into nature and culture (as well as, once again, the opposition between explanation and understanding in sciences) by dealing with the various ways in which nature and culture cooperate to achieve peculiar objects, namely places, or landscapes, which in themselves cannot be considered either primarily natural nor anthropic. Of course, modern geography is usually divided into physical geography, which deals more with natural and environmental

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁶ Vidal de la Blache (1913, p. 299).

⁵⁷ Sauer (1996, p. 300).

⁵⁸ Hettner, 1927, p. 37). Hettner is quoted in Sauer (1996, p. 299).

processes and patterns such as the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and geosphere, and human geography, which focusses instead on how societies and cultures interact with specific environments. But this division, entailed by the increasing need for disciplinary specialization, does not contradict the unitary character of the ultimate object of geography, namely place or landscape. Behind the claim for the unitary character of place and landscape there lies a profound awareness of the bonds between humans and their spatial environments. These bonds are communicated, and hence must be appreciated, at the very level of experience, before being analytically disassembled for explanatory purposes. Geographical experience alone leads to proper geographical knowledge. Maps, here, no longer represent the outcome of geographical knowledge; rather, they regain their legitimate role as tools for the empirical orientation of geographers on their journeys. Landscape's overall nature cannot be entirely displayed on maps. Its unitary character can be appreciated only experientially and aesthetically. Sauer made this very clear when he wrote about the importance of qualitative field methods for geography:

Being afoot, sleeping out, sitting about camp in the evening, seeing the land in all its seasons are proper ways to identify the experience, of developing impression into larger appreciation and judgement. I know no prescription of method; avoid whatever increases routine and fatigue and decreases alertness.⁵⁹

This means that experience, which by definition is limited (and in this sense connected to the issue of understanding as finitude in Ricœur's terms), sets limits to knowledge. Not only that, but experience reminds the geographer of the unitary nature of its object, namely landscape, or place. More precisely, experience bears the traces of the researcher's original belonging to the very object of his research. Before being scientific objects, space, place and landscapes are the settings of every possible experience; before being rational abstractions, they are the very conditions for the unfolding and flourishing of the lifeworld.

Ricœur's thought may help build a bridge between geography as a science and the geographical experience of places and landscapes. It may do so by setting geographical science once again within the ontological dimension of belonging, which in itself must always be presupposed and therefore can never be fully mastered by human reason. Space, place and landscape always display a surplus of meaning analogous to that which Ricœur speaks about in relation to language. As one can see, the epistemological dialogue between Ricœur and human geography entails ontological consequences for the very concepts of space, place and landscape that, I believe, are worthy of further research.

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⁵⁹ Sauer 1956, p. 296.

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