

# The Radicalization of Geography<sup>1</sup>

**Richard Peet**

*Clark University (Worcester, Mass.)*

## Abstract

In the early 1960s, American geography was dominated by regional descriptions, spatial science and cultural geography. The politicized atmosphere of those years pointed to the inadequacy of these approaches to address the concerns of many geographers. That dissatisfaction with the existing geography led to new research areas (poverty, Third World development) and soon to a radical change in the models of explanation that came from the Marxist theory. In the late 1980s and during the 1990s these approaches, which had come to be the dominant with geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith and Jim Blaut, were harshly criticized and challenged from postmodern and post-structuralist positions. In recent years, however, growing awareness of the effects of financial capitalism, neoliberal politics and the environmental crisis has led to an emergence of a new and more diverse generation of radical geographers

**Keywords:** radical geography, marxist theory, neoliberalism, environmental crisis.

## Resum: *La radicalització de la Geografia*

A començaments dels anys 1960, la geografia nord-americana estava dominada per les descripcions regionals, els enfocaments neopositivistes i la geografia cultural. L'atmosfera polititzada d'aquella dècada va posar de relleu la inadequació d'aquells enfocaments per abordar els problemes del moment. Aquella insatisfacció amb la geografia existent va comportar, primer una dedicació a nous temes d'estudi (la pobresa, el desenvolupament del Tercer Món), després un canvi radical en els models d'explicació a partir de la incorporació de la teoria marxista. A finals dels anys 1980 i durant els 1990 aquestes aproximacions, que havien arribat a ser les dominants en mans de geògrafs com David Harvey, Jim Blaut o Neil Smith, van ser durament criticades i qüestionades des de posicions post estructuralistes i postmodernes. En els darrers anys, però, la consciència creixent dels

---

1. Text de la conferència de Richard Peet, impartida a la Societat Catalana de Geografia el 10 d'octubre de 2012, transcrit per Núria Font i revisat per l'autor.

efectes del capitalisme financer i les polítiques neoliberals i de la crisi ambiental ha donat lloc de nou al sorgiment d'una nova generació, més diversa, de geògrafs radicals.

**Paraules clau:** geografia radical, teoria marxista, neoliberalisme, crisi ambiental.

### **Resumen:** *La radicalización de la Geografía*

A comienzos de los años 1960, la geografía norteamericana estaba dominada por las descripciones regionales, los enfoques neopositivistas y la geografía cultural. La atmósfera politizada del momento puso de relieve la inadecuación de aquellos enfoques para abordar los problemas del momento. Aquella insatisfacción con la geografía existente comportó, primero una dedicación a nuevos temas de estudio (la pobreza, el desarrollo del Tercer Mundo), después un cambio radical en los modelos de explicación a partir de la incorporación de la teoría marxista. A finales de los años 1980 y durante los 1990 estas aproximaciones, que habían llegado a ser las dominantes en manos de geógrafos como David Harvey, Jim Blaut o Neil Smith, fueron duramente criticadas y cuestionadas desde posiciones post estructuralistas y postmodernas. En los últimos años, sin embargo, la conciencia creciente de los efectos del capitalismo financiero y las políticas neoliberales y de la crisis ambiental ha dado lugar de nuevo al surgimiento de una nueva generación, más diversa, de geógrafos radicales.

**Palabras clave:** geografía radical, teoría marxista, neoliberalismo, crisis ambiental.

\* \* \*

I will discuss the radicalization of geography in two intersecting ways. Firstly, in general about the radicalization process in the discipline. Secondly I intervene with my personal recollections. I will try to do the two together.

Let me say that the prelude to radicalization in geography was the entry into academia of a completely new and different group of people. In the late 1940's and 1950's governments began to financially support bright working class kids, who could pass examinations, to go to the university. I was the first of my family even to be able to conceive of going to university, by which I mean university education entered the possibility of the imagination –that people like us could afford to go to university, and more than that, have the confidence that we could actually succeed there. We spoke in entirely different ways than the intellectuals of the past, who in England especially, “spoke like the queen”, whereas we all had broad regional accents. And we came as a completely different species, dressed differently, different body language, interested in different kinds of things. The entry of people like us changed academia completely. For the better! And I think geography for the better, as well!

In the early 1960's geography was composed of two types of interest –maybe three. First of all regional description, with very little theory, but cast in terms of an implicit environmental determinism –you always started with the physical environment and worked up towards economy and the human population– so, implicitly, regional environmental determinism. Second spatial

science, location theory, and central place theory –interested in the location of phenomena in space simplified into distance. The two groups of people, looking at geography from these vantage points, did not like each other, did not get on. I did my PhD at the University of California, Berkeley where was a third group interested in historical cultural geography, influenced by Carl Sauer –closer to the regionalists than the spatial scientists.

These were the three alternatives that you had. In my own case, I did location theory. My PhD thesis was on Von Thünen at the global level. Basically I looked at the spread of agricultural zones in global space, considering the industrial regions of the world as “the city” and then the rest of the world as “the plane”. While it was very geometrical, it worked surprisingly well. I published several articles out of it, and those articles got me tenure, after which I changed research direction completely. So, I did my first degree at the London School of Economics, the second, a Master’s degree, at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada, and then my PhD at the University of California, Berkeley. I arrived at the University in Berkeley just in time, for the “good years”. We were demonstrating every day, sometimes twice a day, sometimes you got gassed by the police twice a day. There was a perpetual haze over the campus from the tear gas. Dramatic things were occurring in the United States. A crisis occurred there, and there were mass social movements in opposition to war, for civil rights etc.

So, on one hand we were involved in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement and the beginnings of the environmental movement, or the beginnings of women’s liberation, as we called at the time, and other social movements. On the other hand, we were doing location theory or regional geography. There was little relationship between political practice and academic pursuit. And so we would be heavily involved in radical, political practice and then go back to the geography department. It was like returning to the monastery, worshiping the old gods of geography. We were schizophrenic, completely split between our disciplinary imaginations and our political consciousness. Bit by bit the contradiction between these two entirely different life styles, thought styles, practice styles, began to change our consciousness. Many people, almost at the same time, decided that we had to change our discipline and our geographical practice. It was difficult for us, as young unknown intellectuals, very hard to do that in face of the entrenched power in the discipline controlling jobs and grants, or even whether graduate students received their degrees. But it was even more difficult to change the geographical imaginary. What we did first was simply to try to change the topics of geographical investigation in the direction of issues like environment, Third World development, poverty, etc.

So, take the case of poverty. I got a job at Clark University, almost by accident. I was there two years, teaching location theory to small classes, in what seemed to be an obscure department in terms of politics and social move-

ments. What happened personally is that I simply wrote a new course description, and before I could stop myself, put it through the university bureaucracy. The course was called “Geography of American Poverty” –the Economics department opposed the idea, saying that poverty was economics, not geography! And they were right. I searched the geographical journals for the word poverty. Not a single article had ever been published, in Anglo-American geography, on the topic of poverty. I had to ransack the sociology, economics, and anthropology literatures to compile a miscellaneous, poorly-organized, course outline, with not a single reading from the geographical literature. Then during the summer before I taught the course I become a migrant farm worker, working on the tobacco fields of Connecticut and the potato fields of Long Island, New York, immersing myself among the poor people of the United States.

At that time when we went to a class, we didn’t know how many students were going to be there. I was walking along to the classroom, and it was in a building I was not familiar with, and I couldn’t find the room. I’m walking along the corridor, and there is a room completely full of students, with some waiting outside the door. I wondered what course could that be? I kept walking and realized that was my geography of poverty class! And there were a hundred and fifty students trying to get into a modest sized room. Clearly this was the beginning of a new time, completely different, with totally different students coming into geography (activists rather than memorizers). When I first started teaching –location theory, and similar courses– I had taught in a calm, boring way... I spoke as a “scientist”. But when I taught poverty I awoke from my scientific slumber, spoke in a lively, committed way, as an activist-scholar, because when you talk about poverty, you feel it as you say it. You speak from emotion, whereas when you talk about location theory you speak from the supposed rigor of some kind of mathematical logic.

This was the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. All over, especially in the United States, not so much Britain, they were maybe five years behind, we simply started to teach entirely different topics in entirely different styles. This was the first stage of radical geography: it consisted of different topical foci. The theoretical background to our courses was more or less the existing spatial, environmental theory – what else did we know? But the theoretical imaginaries we held were not suited to topics like poverty. So for example, if you looked at poverty in space –the spatial distribution of poor people– this told you very little about the basic causes of poverty (we ended up calling this “spatial fetishism” –mistaking distribution in space as fundamental cause). We desperately needed some kind of theoretical and philosophical base, to lend explanations greater depth. So you were not doing a particular good job explaining, because the theory was inadequate to the topic. It led to difficult times: feeling intellectually inadequate, making contradictory statements, or having no reply to questions, in front of hundreds of students is truly embarrassing.

Little by little we drifted in the direction of Marxism. But none of us had any background in Marxism, and really to be able to understand Marx you have to have been able to think philosophically and understand at the social-structural theoretical level. It takes a while to remake your consciousness into a structural theoretical consciousness. And then David Harvey, visited Clark. I knew him as the author of *Explanation in Geography*, which was the Bible of positivistic geography. Yet he had long hair, and looked like a hippie, and didn't look like a positivist at all. We were walking one day, and he grabbed my arm and he said... "You have got to read Marx!" I had tried to read Marx. As a working class kid in England, I picked up volume one of *Capital*, read page one, and gave up. I did not understand a word of it! The first sentence was: "the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities". But I hadn't been to the United States yet, so I had not noticed that the world presents itself as a pile of commodities! So I gave up, put it back on the library shelf and that was that for Marx, as far as I was concerned for life.

But you have got to read Marx to be a (leftist) radical intellectual. So again I wrote a course description, this time called "Reading Capital", a graduate course. And I started to read Marx by force, knowing I was just about to teach it. For about three years we read mainly just volume one of *Capital* and gradually began to understand. During the 1970's geography changed again in theory and philosophy as we became committed revolutionary Marxists. People would come to Worcester, Massachusetts –Maria-Dolores Garcia Ramon was one– as though there were going to Mecca. Worcester became the place where people from all over the world would come to hear about radical geography, about anarchism, socialism, Marxism in geography. Bit by bit we even began to know what we were talking about! The great transition in Marxism is when you go from learning Marx off by heart to taking the ideas in, and thinking as a Marxist. That moment is liberating, especially for people from the working class. If you haven't been through it yet, I recommend it! Being able to think independently and creatively, and in your own way, but as a Marxist theoretician.

The 1970's were years of committed revolutionary thought. We were becoming theoretically deeper and more politically committed to Marxism, broadening the set of concepts and topics that we could adequately think and talk about. We began to publish a journal, as a lot of movements do. Within a few weeks of mentioning the idea, we put together the first issue. The secretaries in the Department agreed to type it, for free after work or, when no-one was looking, during work. We mimeographed the pages using one of those machines where you turn a handle, and the pages fly out at the end, and you grab them, put them in order, stamp them with a stapler and there was a journal. And we bought envelopes, put the copies in, and licked the stamps. We did this using collective, volunteered labor and had a superb time. After a

while we had people writing to us, with contributed articles, or asking for subscriptions. That is how we started the journal *Antipode*. I was guest editor for the third edition, with Ben Wisner as general editor. By necessity, I became editor, and remained so for... fifteen years, could it have been?

So, frenetic activities like these consumed the 1970's and by the early 1980's we had become a leading faction in geography, if not *the* leading faction –the most progressive and perhaps even the hegemonic group of people, in the discipline. Our opponents in regional geography and spatial science dropped off the map by comparison. We were armed with some heavy intellectuals like David Harvey, Jim Blaut, Gunnar Olsson and the late Neil Smith.

Then we began to be criticized by people who had read, and committed to, poststructural, and postmodern notions. It was a period of (I thought) nasty, critical interaction between postmodern, poststructural people and us, “old line” Marxist (who had only just begun to think creatively as Marxists). Even though some poststructuralists had been fringe members of the radical geography movement, we were the object of their critique. I don't think that was necessary, and I thought it was overly aggressively turned on us. There was a period of several years when we spent all of our time arguing among two or three basic, political-philosophical positions. We were utterly fascinated by these discussions, spent all of our time thinking about the relationships among postmodernism, poststructuralism and critical Marxism.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, capitalism was changing as neoliberal capitalism was coming in. Yet we hardly noticed, because we were theoretically entertained by this debate. I think that can happen, when you become overly fascinated by theoretical and philosophical debates. You dream philosophy, instead of watching the world. The world changed before we could theorize it. And we found ourselves faced by a far more aggressive, far more powerful, far more persuasive form of capitalism. While we were arguing about the possibility of structural explanation, the structure of capitalism was changing. Of course we noticed that Reagan and Thatcher were elected at the immediate level, but the interest in neoliberalism as a type of capitalism came much later. We should have been on it, immediately. Not that little old geography would have made that much difference, but we should have been involved with the critique of neoliberalism immediately.

So the 1980's was this period of theoretical, philosophical, political debate. I was editor of the journal *Antipode* until 1985. Just as I was leaving the post I signed a contract with a commercial publisher called Blackwells, to publish the journal for us. We had to persuade them to do so –we had tried Routledge and they looked at our balance sheet and said: “not a chance”. Blackwell agreed to take it over because we had personal contacts with the publisher. When I left the editorship, we were charging \$20 dollars a year for a library subscription of four issues. Now Blackwell is part of Wiley, a gigantic multinational corporation. Do you know how much John Wiley charges for a radical journal

that was the result of our hard labor –carrying boxes, licking envelopes, getting comrades all over the world to get their library to subscribe, so we could hand over to Wiley-Blackwell one thousand names of committed subscribers? 995 dollars a year. And we gave them a thousand subscribers –Wiley makes a million dollars a year from what used to be “our journal”. What happened is that even radical journals became big business. Enormous business, some publishers publish two thousand journals! Some of them charge three thousand dollars a year for a subscription. University libraries are spending all of their money on Journal subscriptions. Which is one reason we started a new journal, called *Human Geography*.

The 1980's were bad years for Marxist Geography. During the 1990's the project started to cohere again. Essentially what most intelligent Marxists did is read the poststructural, feminist and postmodern ideas, and simply take from them useful concepts which could be synthesized into an essentially Marxist, but broader critical-theoretical project. Not become overly obsessed, not spend years puzzling over Deleuze, but get the ideas and bring them back to our theoretical base. When I first tried to read Foucault in the original I just couldn't get anything, I read a whole book on “the Statement” without knowing what the statement was. In cases like this, have somebody else puzzle through it, read their version, read some yourself in the original, but do most work on the synthesis.

And then in the late 1990s and 2000's capitalism started to come into increasing contradiction. All over the world, people are looking for fundamental structural explanation again. We found ourselves going from being old, decrepit Marxist dinosaurs, to people who understand and can give convincing explanations. When we hold sessions at meetings the room is packed again. History in some ways repeats itself. But you have to make it repeat itself, by your hard work and through constant rethinking and renewal of the ideas.

What has happened recently is that neoliberalism has culminated into the financial stage of capitalism, in which financial institutions, especially banks and investment banks, rather than industrial corporations, are the dominant institutions. Particularly in the United States, Investment Banks are quite different from Commercial Banks. In the 1930's banking, insurance and share brokering were separated by the Glass Steagall Act, with the banks split again between commercial banks, which have branches on Main Street, and the investment banks, who have offices on Wall Street. Investment banks become increasingly powerful over time. These are banks in which very wealthy people and some mutual fund holders deposit huge amounts of money and then the investment banks very aggressively invest this money and return a high rate of interest. They are particularly powerful because they are interpenetrated with the government. In some ways the government is utterly dependent on investment banks. For example, leading members of the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve, etc., are from the investment banks. This is in part by neces-

sity, because they are the only people who can understand the intricacies of the present banking and financial system. Interpenetrated too because the investment banks invest in the government in the form of huge donations to presidential and congressional candidates, hundreds of millions of dollars and then also spend billions of dollars a year on lobbying. So, essentially investment banks buy the government. An investment banker ran as a candidate to be president of the United States –Mitt Romney. I call him Mitt Wrongme.

So, the financial institutions and the state form this interpenetrated complex, like a finance-capital-state surrounded by investment banks and financial institutions in a powerful, controlling force. Increasingly we are interested in this as theoreticians, to understand the complexities of this new system, and we are interested in it as political people, we are interested as critics, and a whole new line of thought on neoliberalism and finance capitalism has been written, and thought, and discussed over the last ten to twelve years. I would say right now the topic of neoliberalism and finance capitalism is, among Marxist radical geographers, probably the leading theme, the leading topic.

We are also doing very serious work on the environment. In the early 1980's we put together political economy with a critic of cultural ecology into a field called political ecology. Anthropologist had already used that term and were involved in it, but geography definitely came along next. So we have a whole environmental movement in radical geography. I will say those are probably leading themes, and certainly in my own case, so these are the things that utterly fascinate me –for more detail see Benach (2012).

All right, let me tell you about *Human Geography* the new journal that we started five years ago. It came out of the international critical geographers meeting in Mumbai, India, and the idea was to publish again a new radical journal in the discipline of geography. We began to publish it for a couple of reasons. Firstly, a number of younger geographers were having their articles denied publication, because they used the word Marx in the title or referred to Marx too much in the text. Younger radicals were saying to us, it must have been nice, in your day, to be able to publish freely as a Marxist, whereas I just had an article rejected, because it had Marx in the title. What I am to do about it? And I would say, take the word Marx out of the title and put it in the third paragraph where they will not notice. Of course! Be practical! And they would reply saying... but I thought you were a principled person. I said, wait on principals, wait until you have tenure, until you get power, and *then* you can afford to practice your principles. In the meantime... be quiet, take it easy... and they replied, no! So, on the one hand the intense pressure from people who felt they were being discriminated against, as Marxist authors.

Secondly the notion that I explained earlier: journals are now big money makers. And the money is made out of professional labor, it is our surplus value, the multinational publishing corporations are extracting value produced by our talent. Look what we do. We spend two years writing an article. Every



night you go to bed thinking about the article, and you wake up at three in the morning, write a note down, write a phrase down, write an idea down, and go back to dreaming again about the article. Then you submit the article to an editor, a dedicated person who sends it to three peer reviewers, who sit there in anonymity and write critical things about the love of your life, the article that you have written out of your dedication. And you get these three reviews, each sometimes two or three pages long. You put six months work into renewing the article and you send it off with your heart bumping, and try again to get it published, and then you get another review, and finally perhaps you get the letter of acceptance. All these authors, reviewers and editors do serious professional work. They don't get paid for it, they do it out of respect for knowledge, I guess, plus a little bit of glee, because they all know who you are, even if your name is not on the article.

And then they publish the article, and you get the issue of the journal, and open it up, and there is your name, and there is your article. Especially when it is a good international journal, this is an utter delight... to be published. Books are even better. But the point is: serious dedicated labor produces high quality academic work, and multinational corporations are making large quantities of money from that professional, dedicated labor.

So, there is money to be made in publishing journals. Why don't we intellectuals make that money? *Human Geography* the cheapest journal around. But we are already making money, and we reinvest that money in radical research, and in subsidizing radical meetings. We want to invest the income produced by radical academic labor in underwriting high quality radical research. That is a basic purpose of our journal.

So for five years I have been doing exactly what I did in the early 1970's. *Human Geography* even looks like the old *Antipode*. And it is doing fantastically well. We get so many articles submitted that, as editor, I can't even open the emails for several days. The quality of the work that we are getting is as good or better than that we originally published in *Antipode*. A new generation, particularly with Third World intellectuals involved, is producing a renewal in a more diverse radical geography movement.

## Reference

BENACH, Núria (2012). *Richard Peet: Geografia contra el neoliberalismo*. Barcelona: Icaria.