

# CRITICAL RESUME IN ENGLISH

Geoffrey PARKER

The importance of the disciplines working together was an accepted premise underlying this conference. « The world is not constructed on disciplinary lines » said Audigier (Module 1). From the outset the basic distinction was made between interdisciplinarity, pluridisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity and the preference for the former, which maintains the integrity of the disciplines while searching for common ground, was made clear. The function of geography was seen as being to bring together the cognitive sciences into one overall framework. The objective of this was to attempt to reach wider understanding and explanation within the common context of the spatial dimension, and this necessitated the development of not only a methodology but of a specific language. The language actually in use by geographers owes a great deal to those particular cognitive disciplines with which it has been most associated.

The central theme of the conference was thus the development of a language which was specific to the geographical method. Language was considered essential to the whole geographical project. Examination and explanation of phenomena as entities existing in geographical space necessitates the development and use of a language which is specific to the concept of a holistic spatial dimension.

The search for meaning in space and the development of spatial concepts was put forward by Nicolas. These were characterised by the existence of specific sets of spatial phenomena which had their own significance and have been given a terminology to indicate this. This was encapsulated in the Theory of Geography (TEGEO) which underlay the purpose of the conference and was the starting point for discussion on the whole idea of a geographical language.

Since geography essentially concerns spatial relationships it thus possesses its own logic which raises from spatial relationships and can be understood and developed in spatial terms. It is thus possible and necessary to « understand space » which is itself a semiotic using signs and symbols. This was variously referred to as being a « spatial language », a « spatial grammar » and a « non-verbal semiotic ». It was possible to « understand space » through the employment of its own language (Ostrowetsky). This language has the basics of its existence in symbols (maps). Ideas on the nature and formation of this spatial language were put forward and discussed. One of these was that of space as « hypertext » (Gazel). According to this geographical space is of such complexity that it is necessary to organise it in such a way that it can be « read ». This then converts it into « hypertext » which possesses its own rules and its own realities. This then reveals the « real » significance of the spatial dimension.

The various ways of perceiving geographical space are seen as including the role of cartographic representation and the subjective « mental maps » which condition the nature of observation and the conclusions reached (Bachimon). Examples of the role of subjective perceptions were given and these included the diverse national viewpoints regarding the political geography of the Balkans and the role of maps in conflicts in the region (Sivignon). The changed perceptions of the human geography of Switzerland itself during the present century was related to changes in the overall European situation and to the changing role of Switzerland within it (Carrupt).

The consideration of the spatial synthesis as being in itself scientific necessitates the development of a scientific geographical language. The basic rules for such a specifically geographical language was put forward (Richard). This was adapted to spatial concepts and built on logical premises. In view of this it was deemed to be « a true scientific language ».

While the whole debate was very wide ranging and the basic theme was always born in mind, there was clearly disagreement as to the true credentials of geography as a branch of science. Views ranged from those who considered that there was no real geographical science (Hirsch Jemma) to those who spoke confidently of « the cognitive and geographical sciences » (Gazel). There was a similar disagreement over the exact nature

of the language being sought after. There were in fact three interpretations of language in this sense. First, the idea that geographical space itself consists of a non-semiotic language which can be interpreted as such. Second, the idea of a verbal language having its own rules and its own logic as a spatial science. Third, the development of a terminology which, while specific, would operate within a normal verbal context. There was also the wider but generally more familiar idea of the subjective interpretation of maps which is influenced by the spirit of the times and the political climate.

Certainly, the case was made clearly for the idea of spatial explanation to be conducted in spatial terms and using a spatial (geographical) methodology. However, the need for further examination of the nature of the spatial language was to be clearly seen. There was some ambivalence between the idea of geography as being inherently a language and the idea of the development of a scientific language to encompass geographical concepts. The possibility of the unification of the two was acknowledged and research in this area was an important ongoing project.

12. 1997