

The Moral Dimension of Human Geography

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*Quand tu es seul, debout au milieu de la haute plaine d'Asie,
sous la coupole insondable où parfois un pilote
ou un ange sème dans l'azur une coulée d'amidon;
quand tu tressailles sentant ta petitesse,
apprends-le: l'espace auquel semble-t-il il ne faut
rien, a grandement besoin en réalité
d'un regard extérieur, de distance, de vide.
Tu es seul à pouvoir lui rendre ce service.*

*Joseph Brodsky*¹

From the Managerial Cause to a Geographic Theory of Morale

In the course of this century, a number of authors have asserted that geographic knowledge is useful for the development of programs to parcel out land. Hoping to foster this link between insight and action, applied geography saw the light of day. In order to be genuinely effective, the practice of this kind of planning, so it was thought, needed to rely on the expertise of the geographer who studied forms of human settlement.² More fundamentally, the utilitarian claim of applied geography rested on the conviction according to which the spatial organization of human societies brought into play the question of justice and commonweal. As Jean Gottmann wrote, our epoch is particularly sensitive to the fact that everyone, whoever or from wherever they may be, consider themselves "to be entitled to live just as well as all others."³ In this way a "popular will" was affirmed "that the

necessary measures be taken to envisage, prepare, and provide for an improvement of life's comforts ... , for a better life." ⁴ Inspired by the "modern idea of planning," ⁵ applied geography set itself the goal of "establishing justice [...] by a more even distribution of people, of their means of subsistence, [and] of their living standard." ⁶

In espousing this managerial cause, geography plunged into the central question concerning the connection between morality and human settlement. Since claiming a responsibility for land planning, applied geography has argued that the organization of the land is not neutral with respect to morality. If one accepts this notion, two lines of inquiry emerge. On the one hand, we can ask ourselves how geography as a discipline can be harmonized with the prescriptions and obligations of a particular moral doctrine. The task is therefore to submit to an examination of conscience, with the aim of adjusting one's intellectual approach to certain moral precepts. ⁷ On the other hand, we can ask ourselves as to what might be the value of discussing theoretically the possible existence of a moral dimension that is intrinsic to forms of human settlement. This article is concerned with the second line of inquiry. ⁸

The Problematic of the Connection between Man and Nature.

There is a tradition in human geography to give the question of the connections between man and nature first priority in theoretical reflection. It is also remarkable that this connection is virtually always defined from a utilitarian viewpoint. Advocated by the early giants of geography in the universities, ⁹ this definition assumed that man turns toward nature, or toward the external world in general, with the aim of extracting from it resources that he transforms into useful products. In this respect it may be noted that it is of little importance whether utility will be directed by necessity, by convenience, or by pleasure. ¹⁰ Provided they respond to a particular need, all products find their place in the economy. What alone counts is the attribution of a certain value that makes production, exchange, and consumption possible. Useful products find themselves integrated into the economy through

the medium of the value that they are given, be it of usage, exchange, or symbolic content.¹¹

In the same intellectual context it is also customary to conceive of human settlements as an assembly of manufactured implements designed to satisfy individual and collective needs. To the question: "What is space for in the life of human groups?", several geographers have readily replied like Paul Claval: "To produce first of all what is necessary for nutrition, for the manufacture of durable objects and of tools; to construct housing with its necessary outbuildings; to construct roads, [and] to provide for places of assembly. There is no society that has no territorial base allowing it to satisfy its divergent needs."¹²

Moreover the discipline of geography has acknowledged that human settlements shelter technology, an active industry, manufacturing production, which is mechanized, automated. It also tells us that human settlement proceeded territorially ever since men formed groups, agglomerations, and neighborhoods that were demarcated at their boundaries by open spaces and deserts. These developments tend to stress towns *versus* country, centers *versus* peripheries. Finally the discipline of geography argued that human settlement also reflected political power. This power was generally seen as lying in the towns that subdued the countryside and as lying in the centers that dominated the peripheries.

From the perspective of the utilitarian view of the connection between man and nature, all these features of human settlement form the central link of a logical sequence that might be described as follows:¹³ At first, man relied for his livelihood on the resources of the external world to satisfy his needs. Later the unfolding of this activity could not proceed without the introduction of various forms of labor that mediated the exchange between man and the surrounding environment. These forms split into activities requiring effort and control that could be reproduced by technology. The techniques that were developed in this way were geared as much to the natural environments as they were to various cultures. Moreover, socialization is contributing to this mediation technologically, assisted by labor, while benefiting at the time from the

concentration of people which in turn is determined by the concentration of resources. Finally, this socialization is exclusively governed by the rules of hierarchical cooperation.

If one agrees with the preceding sequence, we can deduce that the moral aspects of human settlement rest on the principle that it be as useful as possible for the satisfaction of needs. In this perspective, resources are assumed to be spontaneously at man's disposal in the exact measure of the means with which he is equipped to extract them and to craft them into useful products. Now, such a utilitarian notion turns into the trap of a *petitio principii*. Limited by a strict positivity of value and the utilization of the external world, this definition of the connection between man and nature reaches an impasse with regard to the principle by which value and utilization are generated. In fact, the origin of that positive relationship is not critically interrogated. Accepted right away, this unwavering positivity of value and utilization leads to results that ultimately cannot but confirm what has been postulated. However, it is not at all assured that it will cover the totality of the field that defines the connection between man and nature. Must we not logically also ask ourselves if this connection might just as well be negative? Equally, is it not pertinent to assume that things taken from the external world may find a purpose — a value — that does not lie in the use one has made *a posteriori*, but in the impossibility of their *a priori* use? This means that the positive connection between man and nature conflicts with an even more profound negative relationship.¹⁴

Let us stress immediately that this latter relationship, as indicated by our hypothesis, cannot be conceived of as a human incapacity. It does not stem, for example, from ignorance or incompetence, putting man into a position of provisional defeat in the face of nature. To be sure, human ignorance and powerlessness do exist and can prevent us from succeeding in certain projects. But those impediments are not constitutive of that negativity. If that were the case, the latter would relate to constraints that the exceptional talent of man will in the end overcome. Evolution and adaptation appear to be the solution, and progress will be the sal-

vation. But the negativity would not be a deficit in the positive order. It would not be a passive element that is reabsorbed simultaneously and proportionately as the power of man increases. The negative connection that is inscribed into human geography would rather reflect limits on this power. These limits will not be a lack that belongs to the positive connection, but rather the condition of its origin. It is this that will provide a meaning that permits the integration of the things of the external world into a system of values and utilizations.

The Spatial Prohibition

Conceived like the principle that produces positivity, the negative connection can only proceed from a prohibition. What is this about?

Can one assume that the prohibition that we are thinking about was imposed by man himself? In order to answer this question we must realize, to begin with, that the common site of the utilitarian positivity refers to two realities that are presented as being different, i.e., man and nature; however, that difference is not clarified. By contrast, if we operate with a concept of a close rapport between man and nature that is structured by a dynamic negative relationship, we must acknowledge that this rapport is both conjunctive and disjunctive. In this light, the negative connection — the prohibition — establishes the separation of man and nature just as much as their union. It is an object that interposes itself between the two realities, human and natural; it is a qualitative discontinuity. This discontinuity confers their separate existence upon man and nature. In other words, the prohibition is the source of humanity. Man did not exist prior to its appearance. Consequently, man could not himself issue the prohibition to himself.

At this point in our deliberations, the problem has come to consist in conceptualizing the original prohibition as a rupture, by virtue of which man made himself conspicuous in relation to a continuum. To put it more positively, we have a sense that we are dealing with a structural prohibition that determines the release of an inner dynamic that cannot be reduced to external constraints. This prohibition led to the simultaneous emergence, outside the

continuum, of a human and a natural singularity. According to this interpretation which cannot do without reference to the morpho-dynamic epistemology of René Thom and Jean Petitot,¹⁵ mankind does not define itself according to a nature that precedes and absorbs it. On the contrary, mankind defines itself, contemporaneously with nature, through the prohibition that provoked the emergence of both entities.

This is not to suggest that the prohibition brought forth man and nature in the material sense. It is merely a question of maintaining that mankind and nature stand out as autonomous entities, as functions of a prohibition that separates them by elevating them to a novel relationship. The rise of mankind to an autonomous position is not the correlative of a rejection of nature. On the contrary, it is like this because nature becomes meaningful and interpretable for man; in this way it gains the possibility to become invested with values and to be utilized.

Above all, it is important for us to understand the profoundly negative quality that we have come to see in the prohibition. This negativity underlies all action and all laws. The prohibition places man in a state of deprivation with regard to nature. Subsequently, something positive developed from this deprivation — the formulation of laws thanks to which man can take the prohibition upon himself by applying to himself certain rules of conduct. Seen in this light, the prohibition finds an empirical reflection in anthropology that has observed for a long time that there are no societies without property regulations.¹⁶ Because of its universality, property, that deprives individuals of an immediate and full enjoyment of the external world, testifies to the authenticity of the prohibition. For this reason, we can identify this prohibition as being “of property.”¹⁷

Property that prevents man from dealing directly with nature, actualized a prohibition that separated and united both entities. Put in this way, it becomes clear that the prohibition of property is not intended for a human subjectivity that is already juxtaposed to nature; rather nature emerges as an autonomous entity because the human beings are deprived of it. On the other hand, men con-

struct themselves owing to this loss. Cut off from nature, the individual is pushed back onto himself. His isolation forces him to be different from nature. According to Emmanuel Levinas,¹⁸ this conquest of human identity realizes itself when each subject painstakingly recognizes itself as such because some-one else, similarly a victim of deprivation, appears before him. Confronted with the other, the subject interrogates the human condition. Hoping to avert their loneliness — because they share the same condition — the individual and the other agree to “communicate” with each other.

The theoretical understanding of the prohibition, beyond the empirical fact of property, opens up a way to raise the efficacy of a third level that is essentially political. This higher level is responsible for the ubiquitous application of the prohibition. To this end it assumes the form of the State — taken here in the broad sense — that prescribes laws and rules of conduct, as Maurice Godelier has argued.¹⁹ More so, the State gives names to the subjects so that they are recognizable as owners of property rights.²⁰ In giving names, the State gives to each individual his political existence that is destined to resist the vicissitudes of life and death. The subjects exist thanks to an abstract structure that supports itself independently of their bodies. As Pierre Legendre put it, the named subject cannot die politically: “One can suppress the name, ... but it is not within a person’s power to let the name die. Once the subject is dead, his name becomes the name of a man who has disappeared. In the same way, all are equal before the name, and the institutions function in a way that all men — even the insane — gain possession of a name, that is to say obtain the status of *being a subject*.”²¹

The prohibition relating to property organizes the geographic space politically. It is a spatial ban. By blocking immediate access to local resources, it orders the named subject to target an object of substitution, a position designated to be politically accessible to him. This political overdetermination divided the space of human geography into areas that were open to some in particular because they were prohibited to others in general. In fact, if the prohibition is structural, its negative connection cannot be absolute. It is relative to the legal access that the subject has to the object of substitu-

tion, i.e., the political position. We thus realize that the universal prohibition disintegrates into a plurality of prohibitions that correlate with individual permissions. Each position that is open to one subject is prohibited for others, at the same time as all other positions are closed to that subject, with the exception of its own. Mobility is being conditioned by this structuring of space which, lying at the heart of all settlements, canalizes the trajectories that lead to assigned and politically constituted positions.

The political positions correspond with reserved areas, with vacuums.²² These express an objective morphology of geographic space from which unfold the trajectories of mobility that are achieved by each individual. Given that a trajectory leads to a vacuum, it will force the other trajectories to direct themselves elsewhere. Each vacuum is thus the spatial target of a trajectory at the same time as it is an obstacle to others. The practical contents of what is skirted or aimed at is of little import. The trajectories of mobility are not reducible to what uses are in the end realized. The movements of subjects in the geographic space, even before they conform to a utilitarian end, undergo an inner dynamic of a political kind.

The Moral Dimension Intrinsic to Geographic Space

Due to the distinct political positions that are generated by the spatial prohibition, the subjects are exposed to a dynamic of the trajectories that organizes space and time. In the geographic space, every subject must adjust to a particular trajectory. It must direct itself toward a "distant" political position. In historical time, this position can only be achieved at a later date, having regard to the moment at which it is targeted. Morality, in this dual sense, concerns the inscription of the individual into the structure of space and time, of geography and history.²³ Even more so morality appeared to the subject as being the expression of his liberty. This liberty has a meaning that is the one of the trajectories, i.e., of controls on its liberty that permit the subject to attain the object of substitution: the political position.²⁴

The idea that there exists a connection between morale and the spatial prohibition possibly allows for an original definition of violence. Violence is the negation of liberty, i.e., of the trajectories that lead to political positions. Let us assume that the spatial prohibition confers upon the subject his humanity, but that one subject in particular cannot insert himself into a trajectory. What is indicated to the latter is in this case purely negative. Communication occurs in a unique way: it becomes absurd. Trapped in this way, the subject cannot pretend to conquer a distant object in space-time. Not only does he find himself alone, but he also risks insanity; for he no longer has access to the means of veridicality that the categories of space and time constitute. Although he is forced to exist as a politically instituted and named subject — in view of the fact that he cannot fuse with nature — he cannot as well participate in the human experience that is consistent with geography and history.

Left in this condition and caught in this double bind, the individual becomes a victim of violence. He is sacrificed. We stress the symbolic scope of this violence that is rigorously human, in the sense that it becomes, strictly speaking, political desecration. Physical attack is not necessary for defining this violence. This means that a victim of political violence can well preserve his physical identity as well as genuine comfort, and why not? The fate of this victim does not primarily rest in a possible physical aggression against him that can go as far as murder. To be a victim of violence signifies that *hic and nunc* I cannot stay where I am; that I am unable to direct myself toward the position that is reserved for me.

If we follow this argument, human sacrifice does not consist in shooting someone else. It consists in depriving him of the means of communication, of preventing him from being heard. If it so happens that the victim is killed, his remains may fascinate, as Gaetan Desmarais, following René Girard,²⁵ has underlined. Yet, this fascination does not stem from killing someone physically. Rather it results from the scandal of political isolation that has made the killing possible. For these remains are not just a lifeless

body; it is also the prop of a political existence that, for its part, cannot be interrupted. The physical destruction of a person does not imply the disappearance of the subject who is politically established and given a name. This means that the place of the sacrificed subject remains empty. Since the political subject continues to exist, whether or not he is physically eliminated, the place that he leaves empty, for his inability to attend, cannot be filled by others through stealth.

Geographic space, structurally heterogenous, is composed of political positions. These positions do not follow an exclusive mechanism of forces. It is not as if individuals fight each other at the end of a barbarous selection process, with the consequence that the position of geographic space would come to reflect the notion that "might is right." In such circumstances, the violated subjects would disappear from the scene without leaving a trace. But the reservation of the places is pursued, even though violence prevents any titular to reach his.²⁶

The geographic structure anticipates that political violence, if not completely kept at bay, will at least leave some traces. If the vacuums represent an objective morphological structure, they appear to be as many places which are reserved for everyone: "the absents are not always in the wrong." Each vacuum therefore behaves like a moral objectivity. In this order of reality, political desecration is recognizable in so far as it is the negation of the objective structure that determines everybody's place. It follows from this reasoning that the places of all subjects function like those of the vacuums, except for the difference that some are occupied and some are not.

From Moral Objectivity to the Planning of the Public Place

The space of human geography assigns a place to everyone. That place is more than an empirical phenomenon; it is an object of theory. The distance that separates us from it is qualitative before it is quantitative; it is political before it is topographic. That is why, before pinpointing it, we must comprehend it through a theoretic-

cal exposition. Otherwise we end up supporting a theory of morale that is a constitutive dimension of the geographic object. It follows from these propositions that our discipline — human geography — must force itself to theorize. And with the theory in question being that of a moral object, it seems difficult to be morally responsible like a geographer if the theoretical work fails.

The geographic space makes political violence visible. The vacuums that make it up found a moral objectivity that denounces political rape. The State, that created the law of property, certainly did not prevent the rape from happening. It acts as a guarantor of the sole prohibition by creating a structure where violence leaves a trace. This operation returns to what is called *raison d'État*, which does not mean that the political rape is perpetrated by the State. On the contrary and by definition, the State establishes the subjects and grants them permission to take a position. This notion indicates that political rape does not exist without a State that applies the prohibition. Thus every vacuum is the site of a subject, but also of the State that establishes itself politically. This is why virtually every vacuum is the site of this State: the public place.

This discovery allows us, perhaps, to seize what would be one of the most authentic destinations of human settlement, i.e., the reservation of mortuary places. In so far as we now have in effect defined it, could the public place explain, within human settlements, the existence of areas that are reserved for the dead? If the human corpse deserves a place in the geographic space, could it not be that a person's remains, whether or not he is animate, remain for ever the signifier of the subject's political institution?

Nevertheless, it is not required that the public place also be the site of a sacrifice or of necropolis, a place that will eventually be marked by a stele, a temple, or some other monument celebrating the institutional durability of the subject. The public place is not reducible to the component parts from which one recovers it. One could, for example, create gardens, green spaces, ecological sanctuaries, shopping centers, etc.; for the public place remains essentially the site where the crowd can gather, provided it is, sooner or later, dispersed.

Notes

1. Vertumne (Paris, 1993), 173.
2. There are a great number of secondary sources on this subject, among them: T.W. Freeman, *Geography and Planning* (London, 1958); D. Stamp, *Applied Geography* (London, 1960); M. Phlipponneau, *Géographie et action. Introduction à la géographie appliquée* (Paris, 1960); P. George et al., *La Géographie active* (Paris, 1964); J. Gottmann, *Essais sur l'aménagement de l'espace habité* (Paris, 1966); J. Labasse, *L'organisation de l'espace. Eléments d'une géographie volontaire* (Paris, 1966); J. Beaujeu-Garnier, "Les géographes au service de l'action," in: *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 2, 1975, 290-302; P. Pinchemel, "Aspects géographique de l'aménagement du territoire," in: M. Lamotte, ed., *Fondements rationnels de l'aménagement du territoire* (Paris, 1984), 8-33; P. Merlin, *Géographie de l'aménagement* (Paris, 1988); F. Hulbert, *Essai de géopolitique urbaine et régionale. La comédie urbaine de Québec* (Montreal, 1994).
3. J. Gottmann, op.cit., 19.
4. Ibid., 16
5. Ibid., 9-16.
6. Ibid., 23.
7. J. Forester, for example, does this in his article "The Geography of Planning Practice," in: *Environment and Planning D. Society and Space*, Vol. 1, 1983, 163-80.
8. This article resulted from research undertaken at Laval University in connection with a project entitled "Les enjeux éthiques du développement urbain de Québec" and financed by the "Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada." An earlier version of this text was presented to the meeting of the Association of Canadian Geographers, held at Ottawa in June 1993. The authors wish to thank G. Desmarais, S. Mascolo, and M. Savard of Laval University for the critical comments they made at the time of the editing of this article.
9. See esp. F. Ratzel, "Man as a Life Phenomenon on the Earth," in: H.F. Helmut, ed., *The History of the World. A Survey of Man's Record*, Vol. I (New York, 1901), 61-106; idem, *La Géographie politique* (Geneva, 1988); P. Vidal de la Blache, *Principes de géographie humaine* (Paris, 1922).
10. We are taking here Alberti's categories (*necessitas*, *commoditas*, and *voluptas*) as annotated by F. Choay, *La Règle et le Modèle* (Paris, 1980); See also K. Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (New York, 1977), 125: "The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination makes no difference."
11. The criticism by J. Baudrillard, among others, does not escape this primacy of values. It demonstrates rightly that "objects" do not merely have usage values — they are not just "utensils" — if their consumption drives a "political economy of signs." This is no less the case if the "sign" in question appears as a value, which would justify the integration of the "objects" into the circuit of the general economy. See his *Le Système des objets* (Paris, 1968) and *Pour une critique de économie politique du signe* (Paris, 1972).

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12. P. Claval, *Géographie humaine et économique contemporaine* (Paris, 1984), 162.
13. Several geographers have left a body of scholarship from which we can identify the decisive points of this sequence. Among the pioneering authors are F. Ratzel, P. Vidal de la Blache, J. Brunhes, A. Demangeon, P. George, and P. Claval, to mention only these.
14. G.-H. de Radkowski, *Les Jeux du désir* (Paris, 1980), 23, wrote: "The modern Occident is alone in conceiving of its economy as a positivity by bringing about the complete inversion of its object. It has replaced ascetic restraint with the emphasis on activity — becoming productive. It has replaced the crucial experience of human poverty by the expectation of riches." The author added: "This inversion has given rise to an economics that as a science up to then has been unthinkable: there is no science with a negative object, a science of an anti-object."
15. See J. Petitot, *Physique du sens* (Paris, 1992), 19-64.
16. See, inter alia, M. Godelier, *L'Idéal et le Matériel* (Paris, 1984); E.A. Hoebel, *Anthropology: The Study of Man* (New York, 1966); J. Goody, *Death, Property and Ancestors* (Stanford, 1962); I.A. Hallowell, "The Nature and the Function of Property as a Social Institution," in: *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia, 1955), 236-49.
17. See G. Mercier, "Prémisses d'une théorie de la propriété," in: *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 81, 1986, 319-41. G. Ritchot has suggested to link the incest taboo to this "universal property prohibition." See the special issue (No.15, 1991, 34-36) of *Etudes de géographie structurale*, publ. by the Centre de recherches en aménagement et en développement, Laval University, Quebec.
18. See E. Levinas, *Ethique et Infini* (Paris, 1982); idem, "L'autre, utopie et justice," in: *A quoi pensent les philosophes* (Paris, 1988), 53-60.
19. M. Godelier, op.cit., 105.
20. On the nominal dimension of property, see G. Mercier, "La théorie géographique de la propriété et l'héritage ratzélien," in: *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 98, 1992, 241-42.
21. P. Legendre, *L'Empire de la vérité. Introduction aux espaces dogmatiques industriels* (Paris, 1983), 25. (Italics in the original).
22. The structural geographic notion of "vacuum" has been developed by G. Ritchot in his article "Prémisses d'une théorie de la forme urbaine," in: idem and C. Feltz, *Forme urbaine et pratique sociale* (Louvain-la-Neuve and Montreal, 1985), 37f. It has recently been made the object of thorough semiotic study by G. Desmarais in his *La Théorie de la forme urbaine. Une problématique morpho-sémiotique* (Ph.D. thesis, Montreal University, 1991), 67-100. There is also J.-P. Hubert's project to put it into mathematical form: *La discontinuité critique. Essai sur les principes a priori de la géographie humaine* (Paris, 1993), 120-27.
23. J.-J. Wunenburger, *Questions d'éthique* (Paris, 1993), 9, writes: "... the idea of good deeds and a good life according to a certain number of basic truths appears to be an indisputable anthropological constant." Put in this way, morality will also form a link with mythology that — as N. Frye has shown — plays a major role in the human configuration of space and time. Frye has developed

this question particularly in his last book: *The Double Vision. Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto, 1991), 39-58. One could also refer to Frye's definition of myth in his *Le Grand Code. La Bible et la littérature* (Paris, 1984), 74-99, and *The Modern City* (Toronto, 1990), 105-123.

24. On the theoretical problem of liberty in geography, see J.-P. Hubert, *op.cit.*, *passim*.
25. See G. Demarais, *op.cit.*, 92; R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris, 1978), 115.
26. See G. Demarais, *La Morphogenèse de Paris* (Ph.D. thesis, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1993), ch. 3 and 4, offering an empirical illustration of this process.