Culture, Space and Everyday Life

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Introduction

The title of this essay with its buzzwords ‘culture’, ‘space’ and ‘everyday life’ could stand for the entire field of contemporary cultural geography. What might be expected therefore is an all-encompassing outline of cultural geography or a new theoretical approach to the whole discipline. I do not want to pursue any of these objectives. What I would like to do instead is to ‘simply’ reflect on the notion of the everyday in cultural geography, especially on how the term is used to delineate our object of study when we deal with geographies of everyday life.

Everyday life is a common notion in cultural geography. Indeed, it is so common a notion that we usually do not intend to mean much when we use it. It nevertheless conveys a lot with regards to the observation of geographies of everyday life. First, the notion of the everyday seems to indicate that we are concerned with something in the real world, something that has consequences for our daily lives. Secondly, the notion of the everyday delineates, in a broader sense, our object of study. By means of ‘the everyday’ we draw a distinction and mark one side of the distinction as the field in which we do our research. This distinction and demarcation separates ‘us’ – the observer, the geographer – from ‘them’ – our objects of study, i.e. the geographies and the practices of everyday life as well as the subjects that produce and reproduce these geographies. This second notion implies questions which I would provisionally refer to as the theoretical problem of observing geographies of everyday life.

This problem cannot easily be solved, and I certainly do not want to try and solve in the course of a short paper. What I would like to explicate instead is why there is a problem at all, and why geographers, cultural geographers in particular, should engage with it. To achieve these aims, this essay consists of three steps. First, I briefly explore the ways in which ‘the everyday’ frequently occurs in cultural geography. I then try to show to what extent ‘the everyday’ is a scientific construction that serves as a constitutive element for theoretical and empirical studies in cultural geography. In the third section, I draw upon Bourdieu’s theory of practice in order to further investigate into the problem of reflexivity. This allows for some concluding remarks about why cultural geographers should take seriously the theoretical problem of observing geographies of everyday life.

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Cultural geography and the everyday

In the aftermath of the ‘cultural turn’, cultural geography is preoccupied with signifying systems and cultural practices – practices ‘through which a social order is communicated, reproduced and experienced’ (Duncan 1990, 15). Taking up a ‘more linguistic-semiotic account of culture’ (Philo 1991, 13), cultural geographers look at how people in their everyday life understand the geographical world, and how they represent it to themselves and to others. It is generally agreed that the cultural turn ‘has paid enormous intellectual dividends’ and ‘has made things a lot more interesting’, as Nigel Thrift noted. Yet the cultural turn has also been criticised. Some of its former proponents now bemoan that the cultural turn has led to ‘dematerialized’ and ‘desocialized’ geographies (Philo 2000). In a critical state-of-the-art paper on cultural geography ‘post the cultural turn’, Chris Philo regards the ‘cultural turn’ as bearing the danger to drain ‘some of the substance out of what many of us used to conceive of as social geography’ (ibid., 30).

Others argue in a similar way, considering the loss of perspective for more explicit social explanations with reference to the ‘material world’. According to Don Mitchell, for instance, cultural geography runs the risk of losing sight of the socio-economic conditions, while ‘in fact, the economic (...) is inserting itself into every pore of social and private life’ (Mitchell 2000, 4). Instead of falling for the cultural temptation, human geography should regain awareness of the production and reproduction of social life. Thus, Mitchell pleads for approaches that take the social, economic and political constraints of everyday practices more seriously.

A similar turn towards practices and everyday life can be found in what has been called ‘non-representational theory’. Its theoretical framework is supposed to show the way to a ‘fuller appreciation of the variety of differences between human cultures’ (Pile & Thrift 1995, 15). According to Nigel Thrift, this way leads towards a ‘theory of practices’ concerned with the ‘flow of everyday life’ (Thrift 1997, 143). While it is not entirely clear how the manifold theoretical references of a non-representational theory can form a comprehensive and consistent approach, it is clear what non-representational theory is supposed to be about: Non-representational theory is, as Catherine Nash puts it, ‘about mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites’ (Nash 2000, 655).

Summing up the criticisms of the cultural turn, I assume that I am not completely wrong if I conclude that the current emphasis of the everyday in cultural geography derives from the urge to deal with ‘practices that take place on the ground’ or, as Philo puts it, from the urge to cope with ‘the more “thingy”, bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the-world kinds of “matter” (the material) with which earlier geographers tended to be more familiar’ (Philo 2000, 33). The notion of the everyday is supposed to bring to mind ‘some kind of “gritty” real social world’ (ibid.).
The everyday and the scientific view

Searching for theoretical guidance in the field of everyday life, human geographers have often turned to the work of Henri Lefebvre. While the everyday can be regarded as a key category in Lefebvre’s work, it takes on two different meanings. On the one hand, the term stands for the daily routines of ‘ordinary people’. In this guise, the everyday designates – in critical respect – the bulk of banal, repeated, non-creative practices. On the other hand, Lefebvre invokes the term to address the transformative potential, the subversive power, of ordinary life. ‘Everyday life’ is, therefore, both a category that forms the object of critical investigation and a utopian construction marking the vanishing point of a better world.

Supplementing these two notions, Lefebvre (1968) gives the everyday a third specification. In the first chapter of La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne, he states that the term ‘everyday life’ first of all discerns the ‘everyday’ from the specific viewpoint of an academic perspective. ‘Everyday life’ marks an abstraction which allows for reflections on the non-scientific and, thereby, distinguishes a world of scientific reflections from the world of ongoing practices, tacit knowledge and skillful actions. Lefebvre’s account of the everyday is clearly influenced by the phenomenological tradition. There we find the same distinction of everyday life and scientific observation. According to the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, ‘the everyday’ encompasses all sorts of non-scientific experience. Schütz distinguishes the ‘everyday world’ as the realm of pre-scientific knowledge and perception from scientific cognition and reflection. Against this background he states that social and cultural theorists produce constructs of a second level that replace the constructs of the first level, i.e. the cultural constructs of everyday life.

This is, in short, the rationale of a cultural geography that focuses on the practices by which social actors, in their everyday life, ‘make geographies’. Observing and explaining these activities with scientific means dissociates the researchers from the very ‘concrete’, or ‘real’ world they are so eager to explore. Yet this dissociation – in the sense of a rupture épistémologique – is neither a ‘natural fact’ nor an ontologically given structure of reality. It rather is the effect of a distinction that has to be drawn by the observer who thereby distinguishes himself/herself as an observer. In short, the everyday is continually constituted as ‘the other’ of the academic realm. It is constituted by academic observations which, in turn, constitute the scientific perspective itself.

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2 While the latter is characterised by systematic doubt and reflexivity, the former encompasses non-scientific knowledge resting upon the belief in the being of the objects around. The attitude of everyday life expressed in everyday language therefore holds a ‘naive’ realism that provides a ‘ground’ for reasonable and practical action and for the constitution of objects in the world.

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Towards reflexivity in cultural geography

Against this background, the theoretical problem inherent in the academic concern with geographies of everyday life becomes obvious. As pointed out in the first section, geographers are prone to explore everyday life as the field of mundane practices. In this sense, the everyday provides us with innumerable research questions of how geographies of every life are produced and reproduced in different times and at different places. While these might be important questions, there is, however, a problem in that there is no such thing as the everyday. As I hope to have shown in my second section, the constitution of the everyday cannot be dissolved from the existence of a scientific point of view. The everyday is a field of research only if we take up the position of a researcher into the social world.

How to deal, then, with the fact that researchers are involved in the constitution of their objects of study? In order to answer that question, I draw upon arguments which can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In several studies of the ‘scientific field’, Bourdieu demonstrates how a ‘theory of practice’ can be interpreted as a theory of scientific knowledge. The cornerstone of this intellectual enterprise is the notion of reflexivity.

‘Reflexivity’ is by no means a novel claim in social and cultural theory. Indeed it is a key note in discussions about research methods – methods that are supposed to generate a more subtle understanding of the meanings and everyday interpretations that shape the conduct of everyday life. Surely, such methodological reflection is not without benefit for the research process. It allows for a circumspect handling of data and may lead to new forms of representation.

While methodological reflexivity is by now well rehearsed in cultural geography, I want to stress the importance of being reflexive in more epistemological ways. In epistemological terms reflexivity challenges the attempt of observing the world from a scientific viewpoint. According to Bourdieu, the general perspective of scientific observation is a ‘scholastic point of view’ which takes the everyday world as an object of study without critically investigating the preconditions of scientific observation. This lack of awareness can be identified as the source of two versions of the same ‘epistemological fallacy’: of a ‘structural determinism’ on the one hand and of an ‘intellectualist voluntarism’ on the other hand. In both cases, Bourdieu argues, theoretical constructions are mistaken for the principles of practices of everyday life. While structuralist explanations tend to reify their construction of symbolic orders, subjectivist approaches tend to treat the specific view of a professional interpreter as the ubiquitous attitude of ordinary, i.e. everyday, people. According to Bourdieu, the ‘mistake’ of projecting theoretical constructs onto the objects of study can be avoided if scientific constructions are permanently reflected upon.

While Bourdieu does not provide a ready-made ‘manual’ for enacting reflexivity, some guidelines are given in his later writings. Reflexivity in social and
cultural theory is not confined to a special field of self-sufficient theoretical discussion. It is a prerequisite for any scientific encounter with 'the everyday'. Being reflexive, therefore, does not mean to play theoretical games for theoretical purposes. Reflexivity rather derives from an attempt to avoid what has been referred to as 'epistemological fallacy', i.e. the tendency to mistake explanatory conceptions as for principles of the observed practices.

Enacting reflexivity does not presuppose the invention of new theoretical vocabularies. Reflexivity can be achieved by applying the theory of practice to the practices of scientific research. In terms of Bourdieu's theory, that is to explore the relation between the intellectual field and the scientific habitus. Like all social fields, the 'scientific field' has its operational principles and its mechanisms to signify positions, to delimit its borders, to regulate the discourse and to construct truths. And it is through their 'scientific habitus', through incorporated structures, that researchers are 'pre-configured' to generate discourses that follow these principles.

In order to be reflexive, we therefore have to deal with the scientific field and the respective dispositions of its participants. Put differently, we have to ask how much our involvement in the scientific field affects our way of thinking about practices of everyday life. We have to ask how our involvement affects our choice of research topics, research questions and methods, and how it affects our categories of description as well as our strategies of representation and distribution.

To sum up: A theory of practice provides a way into the more concrete and material conditions of daily life. It can, however, also serve as a tool to unearth the social conditions of scientific observation and research. As such, it can remind academics that there is no such thing as the everyday. The everyday as a field of research is an invention and a construct of scientific observation. Therefore, an understanding of everyday practices can only be achieved via the permanent ‘detour’ of taking seriously the need for reflexivity in scientific observation.

References


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