INTERVIEW

Benno Werlen



Interviewed in november 2012,
by Alcides Manzoni Neto, André Pasti, Luciano Duarte and Wagner Nabarro

We have interviewed Benno Werlen during his visit to São Paulo, where he gave a lecture about *Spatial Relations and the meaningful construction of geographical realities* to the University of São Paulo (USP) Post-Graduation Program in Human Geography. He has received us with great disposition, presented his trajectory and discussed his proposal of an action-centered Geography — establishing a dialog with several authors, such as the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos —, besides developing his critique of contemporary regionalisms and problematizing several valuable topics to the contemporary world.

We had institutional support from Prof. Fabio Betioli Contel, from the Geography Department of FFLCH/USP and member of our Scientific Council, in making this interview possible and also in the text revision of both versions of it published in this edition — in English and in Portuguese. Thus, we publicize our most sincere gratitude. The availability, the rigor and the seriousness of Benno Werlen in relation to this interview also deserve to be remarked and thanked.

* * *

Boletim Campineiro de Geografia: We would like to start by asking you about your academic trajectory. How was your approach to geography and how did your dialogue with sociology begin?

Benno Werlen: This is a longer story. As a teenager, I wasn't much interested in geography. Rather, — among other things — I had a passion for philosophy and literature — the humanities in general. As I discovered later, many of my questions were in fact geographical questions. However, this did not occur to me initially due to the rather traditional geography education that I had.

I started off my tertiary education at the University of Fribourg on the border of French- and German-speaking Switzerland intending to study humanities. I majored in German and French literature, and considered taking history as a minor. However, I was strongly attracted by Prof Jean-Luc Piveteau's first geography lectures and discovered that my questions regarding the interrelation of culture and nature, the specificities of urban life, etc. had a lot to do with geography. After completing my first degree in 1976, I combined geography and social sciences — sociology, economics, and cultural anthropology — for my second degree. Given Fribourg's bilingual French-German tradition, the geography department is probably the only French-speaking one located within a faculty of natural sciences. At the time, it was also the only German-speaking department in which geography had very strong institutionalized links with the humanities and social sciences, probably due to the founding director of the department, the French geographer Jean Brunhes[1], being a pioneer of social geography.

Studying in Fribourg provided a rare opportunity to be enrolled at the faculty of humanities while majoring in geography. In those days — in the 1970s and 1980s to be precise — this was quite unusual, because geography was mainly

1 Jean Brunhes lectured at Fribourg between 1896 and 1912.

considered a natural science and geography departments were therefore usually located within the faculty of science. In addition, only a very few students combined majors and minors from faculties with such seemingly disparate orientations as the humanities/social sciences and natural sciences. However, by choosing social theory and geography as my subjects, I could combine my interests in a way that — unlike most other approaches at that time — was not characterized by naturalistic assumptions or spatial scientific orientation. That is, I did not take the principles, approaches, and methodologies of the *natural* sciences to provide a suitable path when seeking to explain *social* phenomena. My studies did, of course, require me to write papers in physical geography, and I even had a keen interest in climatology. I was very impressed by the deductive theoretical construction, ranging from the theory of gas, atmosphere and geophysics to the micro-climatic conditions of localities, vineyards, and even individual plants, etc. However, my interest in social phenomena outweighed my climatological ambitions and I decided to continue my studies in the human and social geography.

Here, I met several highly regarded human and social geographers at that time; remember, we are still in the 1970s/1980s. In particular, I remember an inspiring presentation by Anne Buttimer at Fribourg, as well as similarly interesting talks by Paul Claval, Roger Brunet, Claude Raffestin, Jean-Bernard Racine, Antoine Bailly, and Yves Lacoste to name but a few. Consequently, my academic socialization was strongly influenced by discourses in the francophone geography. Throughout those formative years, however, I felt dissatisfied with the concept of social geography promoted in the French-speaking discourse. To my mind, it focused too heavily on both history and quantitative methods. I felt that a solid socio-theoretical foundation was lacking. At that time, social theory was my main field of interest, and has been ever since.

My first dissertation, submitted in 1980, was concerned with functionalism in geography, social sciences, cultural anthropology, and economics. At the time, general systems theory became increasingly popular in geographical research, but no clear distinction was made between social and natural systems; some scholars even regarded landscapes as spatial systems. My main interest was the epistemological basics of systems theory and the theoretical implications of functionalism. Through this work I read many of the classic German-speaking social sciences texts, particularly those related to social and cultural theory. I learned a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of both functionalism and systems theory, which, interestingly, share the same line of reasoning. In my dissertation, I contended that a corollary of this is that general systems theory reproduces the

shortcomings and problematic implications of functionalism.

My dissertation was read by the then leading German geographer Dietrich Bartels[2], who subsequently offered me a position as his research assistant at Kiel in the north of Germany. Although I worked there for only about a year, from 1980 to 1981, it was a rather intense time. I learned a lot about the German geographical tradition and was very busy with a large number of teaching assignments. After that experience I returned to Fribourg for a short time before moving to Zurich. In this second Fribourg period we had an interdisciplinary reading group — initiated by Jean Widmer — of students and young lecturers from a wide range of disciplines, including economy, law, philosophy sociology, anthropology, who read and discussed classical texts in their original version. This was before I left for Zurich, where I finished my PhD thesis on an action-centered geographical research perspective in 1985, an extremely fruitful experience. The PhD thesis was first published in 1987 as "Gesellschaft, Handlung und Raum," with a second edition following quickly in 1988. A part of the book was translated into English and published in 1993 as "Society, Action, and Space." In "Gesellschaft, Handlung und Raum" I tried to develop a genuine social geography that was firmly grounded in social theory and turned the prevailing geographical world view on its head: This approach did not seek to explain individual actions and social practices in terms of geographical aspects, such as distance, climate, and so on, but — quite the opposite — to explain geographical phenomena in terms of social actions and social practices.



This approach ran counter to the then dominant reduction of the social to the geographical/spatial, which used to be the standard approach in academic geography. Consequently, my ideas were met with considerable skepticism, at times. In Zurich, geography was part of the faculty of natural sciences, with only loose ties to the humanities or social sciences. Among so many natural scientists, I found it difficult to maintain a socio-theoretical perspective of geography. The effort was often met with hostility. An invitation to Cambridge by one of the

2 Dietrich Bartels (1931-1983) was a german geographer which, among others, asserted that economic and social geography should be considered as an action-based spatial science.

leading social theorist of our time, Anthony Giddens, therefore came as almost a relief as it allowed me to mingle with like-minded people. My affiliation with King's College, specifically allowed me to become embedded in the social scientific community, which included David Held, John Thompson, Teresa Brennan, Susan James, Ernest Gellner and many others. An invitation from the famous geographer Richard Chorley and the affiliation with Sidney Sussex College allowed me to keep in touch with geographers like Graham Smith, Stuart Corbridge, Chris Philo, Jennifer Robinson, Ron Martin, and others.

I first met Anthony Giddens when he presented a lecture at the invitation of our working group — which included Carlo Jaeger, Huib Ernste, Dagmar Reichert, Wolfgang Zierhofer, and Franco Furger — on a new human ecology at the ETH in Zurich early in 1988. Anthony Giddens was interested in the geographical dimension of social practice, while I was concerned with establishing a socio-theoretical basis for geography. Our collaboration proved immensely helpful to advance my knowledge of and strengthen my links with Anglo-Saxon social scientists and geographers. I had the opportunity to meet some of the emerging younger human geographers, including Derek Gregory, Nigel Thrift, Susan Smith, and Felix Driver, shortly after the publication of my PhD thesis in the autumn of 1988. This first personal contact with Anglo-Saxon geographers was, however, not particularly fruitful in theoretical terms. In my view, they were not very interested in a differentiated, serious collaboration with social theory. For many years I did not understand why this was so. In hindsight, I believe their objective was to establish a genuinely geographical approach as distinct from a sociological one. They were concerned with demarcating and defending the field of geography and considered any cross-fertilization with sociology a theoretical step backwards. In contrast, my idea of theoretical progress was built on the integration of geography and social theory, as I believed this would result in a more adequate and comprehensive theoretical framing of human actions and social practices.

Anthony Giddens was interested in the geographical dimension of social practice, while I was concerned with establishing a socio-theoretical basis for geography.

This attempt has certain similarities with David Harvey's integration of spatial dimension into Marx's theory. Harvey, like many other geographers from this and earlier generations, including Gunnar Olsson, Edward Soja, and many representatives of the "spatial turn," held the view that the social sciences and

humanities took space into account inadequately, or did not do so at all. This is obvious, but I disagree — at least in certain respects — with how they tried to overcome that weakness. If you don't stick to geographical space as your starting point, it is possible to discover, for instance, a Marx taking material conditions and their spatial dimensions into account without explicitly referring to "space" as such. A good example of Marx's rather implicit consideration of space is his analysis of the organization of the industrial factory in section four of chapter 12 in volume one of "Das Kapital" (Teilung der Arbeit und der Manufaktur). Here, and in other parts of his work, he does indeed talk about the material world and, to some extent, even about questions relating to spatial distance. However, Marx's notion of space is not the geographical one. Marx was not a geographer, that's certain. However, if you think of "space" as a way of discussing the material world and its organization, then you could discover spatial aspects in Marx's theory and in the writings of other social theorists. But the question remains: What kind of concept of space is compatible with what kind of social theory?

Marx's theory is not, of course, my specific field of work. Simply put, I'm more interested in the human subject as having the potential to create things. From my perspective, the subject should not be understood as dominated or determined by objective circumstances. My approach to an action theory emphasizes that people can unchain themselves and do things differently from the way they were done before. In other words, people always have alternatives. While material circumstances may influence their action, they certainly do not *explain* them. This means that, strictly speaking, there is no causal link between geographical "space" and action; actions and social practices cannot be explained by geographical space in the sense of a natural scientific causal explanation. But the circumstances under which subjects live — especially the spatial, including the local and regional ones — are extremely important for the scope and range of successfully implemented intentions and decisions. Many of the intentions are even evaporating in the face of the circumstances.

From my perspective, the subject should not be understood as dominated or determined by objective circumstances. (…) People always have alternatives.

This probably does not — and I would argue certainly does not — differ much from the Marxist view. However, the difference probably lies far more in the emphasis of the creative potential of every person, of each subjective actor. But this view also differs from an individualistic understanding of humans as *ego*-centered

"singular units" — *the* individual, if you like. The kind of action theory that I suggest as a theoretical framework for geography is not an individualistic one like that of neoclassic economy or neoconservative liberalism; rather, it is subjective. Conversely, an action-centered perspective considers subjects as strongly embedded in socio-cultural and biophysical contexts. The subject therefore has responsibility for her or his socio-cultural, as well as her or his biophysical contemporaries' worlds, including solidarity and precautionary consideration; the latter — by the way — is often misleadingly called environmental protection or conservation.

In fact, this action theory emphasizes the "creative potential of the subject" and refers to a kind of "empowerment." The emphasis of the subject's potentials should rather to be understood as a form of empowerment of each person's capabilities and rights, and, especially, as an attempt to undermine certain forms of scientific arrogance. By that I mean that the people we investigate should be seen as having — in principle — the same abilities as scientists do, and not just as dim-witted, responding units, who cannot be intentional, do not have imaginations, social competences, etc.

In this respect Giddens's theory of structuration seemed to offer a good "solution" to how to emphasize "power" more than the classical theories of action do without undermining the potential for intentionality and creativity. I must say that I was fairly critical of Giddens's theory prior to my stay at Cambridge, and, to certain extent, I still am, but in a different way. Let me explain. The time at Cambridge proved to be immensely fruitful for the further development of my goal to establish a distinctly socio-theoretical basis for geography. In addition to the possibility to take the dimension of power into account, I began to discover many more options to link structuration theory and geography than I had previously thought existed. Consequently, I was able to develop a "structurational" perspective of geography that took a different direction than the Anglo-Saxon debate in the late eighties and even Anthony Giddens's own suggestions regarding geography. My first point at that time was to change the focus of Giddens's structuration theory by making "agency" the core on which to build the rest of the theory. Basically, this is also Anthony Giddens's point, but I was radicalizing it, I suppose. I was reorganizing the theoretical body, more consistently making structure an element of action or agency than Giddens had suggested. Therefore, if the focus is on action and agency, the subject is the core aspect around which the rest of the theory revolves. I think I can say that I revised Giddens's theory to an action/agency-centered geographical research perspective by introducing the spatial dimension in a systematic, action-compatible way. Thus, similar to the

ontological features of late-modernity, the core aspects of structuration theory can be — I hope — brought to full development for geographical research.

As I mentioned, regarding the subject as the focal point of social theory implies that we also have to put the subject in the center of the social theory of space. Bourdieu and Giddens are known as sociologists, and as not "space-blind." But, I believe they are not radical enough. They take (earth) space as something non- or pre-theoretical, something that "is there" independent of, or prior to, social theory. In my view, that is not really convincing. "Space" "is" also a theoretical concept and, therefore, we have to look for a concept of space that is compatible with social theory, or, more specifically in this case, with action or agency theoretical conceptualizations of the social world. "Space," or the experiencing of reality as spatial, is constructed and constituted by the subject, by the subject's practices. What space "is" for the acting subject depends on what the subject is doing: It is action-dependent and not pre-existing, it is socially constructed in an inter-subjective way and not a containment of, or a frame of measurement for, the social. According to action-centered geography, we need to understand "space" as a concept, and we have different concepts of space depending on what we are doing. At Cambridge, I started to develop a social-theoretically compatible theory of space, reconstructing the basic assumptions of the various concepts of space used in the context of geographical theories and methodologies (absolute container space, relational space, a priori space, etc.), and evaluating them for practice-centered world-views. That is the basis of the social geography elaboration of "everyday regionalization" on which I continued to work after my return to Zurich, as well as at my current position as Professor for Social Geography at the Department of Geography at the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena in Germany. The last step in this theoretical work is the elaboration of a research design for what I call the analysis of spatial relations' role in the constitution of social realities, especially in light of the enforcement of globalization of nearly all



domains of everyday geographies.

BCG: In Brazilian geography, Milton Santos, in the book entitled "The Nature of Space," discusses the advances and contributions of your work. However, the author maintains that is has some limits, claiming that your work may have too much focus on action, disregarding the importance of objects that store and condition the possibilities of action. Milton Santos considers them indissociable — the systems of objects and the systems of actions. What do you think about that?

Benno Werlen: This kind of criticism might need to be contextualized and differentiated to avoid unnecessary complications. First of all "Society, Action and Space" should be read while keeping the historical context at the time of writing in the early eighties in mind. After some brief remarks on this, I will return to the question of the interconnection of systems of actions and systems of objects. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, geographical debate was dominated by two approaches. On the one hand, there was the still very powerful objectivistic spatial approach articulated, for example, in the extremely successful textbook on spatial analysis by Abler, Adams, and Gould[3]. On the other hand, there was the subjectivist humanist approach in line with the questions that Anne Buttimer and Torsten Hägerstrand were asking. Buttimer (1976)[4] raised the question of the "dynamism of life-world" Hägerstrand (1970)[5] asked "What about people in regional science?" My starting point was to ask how the spatial approach's weaknesses could be replaced with a more encompassing approach, thus taking the problem constellations of everyday people all over the world seriously beyond evolutionary or functionalistic judgments, how people had to do things without taking their views and problems into account. Or, in short: replacing the objectivistic perspective with a subjective perspective that had subjective agency at its center and not space.

To develop my critique, I started reading up on Anne Buttimer's epistemological background and on the phenomenological approach used in humanistic geography. To grasp the logic behind the spatial approach, I read the key texts of critical rationalism by Karl Popper because Bartels claimed that Popper provided the basis for a sound theoretical concept of geography as a rigorous and serious science — as spatial science. By doing so, I discovered a phenomenology

3 ABLER, Ronald; ADAMS, John S.; GOULD, Peter. *Spatial organization*: The Geographer's View of the World. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

4 BUTTIMER, Anne. Grasping the dynamism of lifeworld. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66: 277-92, 1976.

5 HÄGERSTRAND, Torsten. What about people in regional science? *Papers of the Regional Science Association*, 24, 1-12, 1970.

that was quite different from the one debated in humanistic geography. I also discovered a totally different Popper than the one to whom Dietrich Bartels had referring. I didn't find the framework for spatial science as a form of generalization of natural scientific methodology for all disciplines, whether natural or social scientific, along the line of the frequently claimed hypothesis of the unity of the method for all types of scientific research. Instead, I discovered an action-centered theory of the social with a specific methodology that differed from the methodology applied in the natural sciences. Popper never claimed that the social sciences should use the same methodology as the natural sciences. Similarly, I also interpreted phenomenology quite differently from what the geographical debate at that time suggested. Phenomenology and its key thinkers are so diverse that it is virtually impossible to use it as a coherent theoretical background for geographical research. Just think of the differences between Alfred Schütz and Martin Heidegger, for example. Engaging with the original texts of Karl Popper, Edmund Husserl, and Alfred Schütz and reading the classics of social action theory changed the project's initial orientation. I developed a grid to compare these different approaches and identify their specific field of competence beyond any form of scientific imperialism. I concluded that they were different, even incompatible at time; yet, they were congruent in some aspects. What this shows is that we need to make clear ontological distinctions between the world of objects and the world of meaning. Actions produce meaningful realms, but it is difficult to talk about "systems of objects" and "systems of actions" as being "indissociable" or even as being integrated. The question to ask then is: What could the link or the integrative moment of the two be?

If you consider objects or "systems of objects" as having explanatory power (as opposed to considering actions as having explanatory power), then you have to accept that objects are constitutive for the social in and of themselves. And I wouldn't agree on this point

In "Society, Action, and Space" I discuss objects and bodies — human bodies — as a part of the biophysical world, and meanings and significations as part of the socio-cultural and subjective realm. This is, of course, a very general way to talk about objects and meanings. However, philosophically speaking, there are many reasons for making such distinctions, especially with respect to the history of geographical thinking. I do not want to go into too much detail here but my point is: If you consider objects or "systems of objects" as having explanatory power (as opposed to considering actions as having explanatory power), then you have to accept that objects are

constitutive for the social in and of themselves. And I wouldn't agree on this point because to me it is obvious that all objects are assigned meaning by the acting subject through socially and culturally impregnated attributions. Objects do not have a meaning in and of themselves. If you accept this, then you would also come to the conclusion that a particular object can have multiple meanings, or can change its meaning depending on what we use it for. And objects' constraining quality regarding certain types of action is based on many kinds of actions being body-bound. Like objects, our bodies are, on a first level, material extended with a defined spatial position. Therefore, when you perform embodied actions, you have to deal with these objects and their qualities; you have to take them into account. Depending on the way you act, this "taking into account" will turn out differently.

The point I would like to make here is that we should take the material aspects of our fields of action very seriously, including the corporeality of the acting subject. This is what is missing in nearly all theories of action and most social theories. But I will not accept that objects have a meaning in themselves, or that objects even constitute the meaning of the social world. The constitution and attribution of meaning is the act of subjects. These subjects are embedded in social worlds, in cultural worlds, in economical worlds, and in all of them subjects are confronted with constraints. We are not free, but we have a potential to decide. We are subject to a variety of constraints but we can contemplate how to deal with them or to overcome them. This is why I put so much emphasis on the subject's constitutive and the constitution of meaning by the subject. We can always *consider* acting differently. Whether we are actually *able* to act differently depends on the power we have in each of the aforementioned worlds (social, cultural, economic). This should make it obvious why, from an action-centered point of view, the "role" of objects regarding actions can only be identified in the perspective of the action to be performed and not the other way round from the object to the action.

Another aspect comes in view if we differentiate between objects in an action-centered perspective. However, matters differ very much when we talk about the interrelation of social action and human-made objects called material artifacts or technical artifacts. This allows the interrelation between the objectified, materialized results of meaningful and intentional actions and currently performed social action to be addressed. The interesting and important point here is that material artifacts can be understood as a kind of technical institution with a double status: material and social; material in their constitution, social in their socio-practical meaning for their potential users. Examples include stairs for going up or down, a machine for the production of goods, many types of technical

instruments or, geographically particularly relevant, the entire infrastructure (roads, highways, train, and communication networks in general, etc.), with its specific, socially produced, spatial patterns and its spatial arrangements that, in a Hegelian sense, contain, harbor, or preserve social relations or, more precisely, social relations of power. To a certain extent, the world of artifacts is an interface of the social. Here, we can address the spatial implications of disparities of power and, for everyday geography-making, the implications of the construction and reproduction of geographical realities

I (…) hope that the later elaboration of action and practice-centered geography offers a larger common ground with the work by Milton Santos

But Milton Santos is certainly right that the integration of objects into action theory could be more prominent in "Society, Action, and Space." This has been corrected in the elaboration of the theory of the social geography of everyday regionalization by referring to the allocative resources as one of the power dimensions in the sense of Giddens's structuration theory. Allocative resources refer to the capability of control over the object-world, means of production, nature, and natural objects. This allows a more strict integration of the object world into the theory of practice than possible in a theoretical framework linked more to classic of action theory. I therefore hope that the later elaboration of action and practice-centered geography offers a larger common ground with the work by Milton Santos, which I have always greatly respected.

BCG: In your paper, "Regionalism and political society,"[6] which has been translated into Portuguese, you tell us that the spatial descriptions became increasingly problematical politically, in addition to losing their power empirically. Which resources could be worthwhile for late modernity geography and purposeful for public policies and urban planning?

Benno Werlen: That is indeed a very complicated question with very many implications. First of all, we have to consider the context of this paper. It is the first chapter of a book titled "Schützian Social Science"[7] published to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Alfred Schütz. It was first presented at a conference on Alfred Schütz as a social theorist. In this paper, I attempt to use the phenomenological perspective to combine micro- and macro-theory; everyday life

6 WERLEN, Benno. Regionalismo e sociedade política. *GEOgraphia*, v. 2, n. 4, 2000, p. 7-25. Tradução: Rogério Haesbaert. Revisão: Wolf-Dietrich Sahr.

7 EMBREE, L. (ed.). *Schützian Social Science*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.

and the global; everyday life and the political. According to the conference participants, this was the first attempt ever made to link Schütz's social theory and philosophy with the globalization topic and related macro theoretical topics.

In my presentation, I spoke about traditional spatial descriptions of socio-cultural realities increasingly losing their explanatory power in late-modernity. My main thesis is that we need to focus more on the acting subject. In other words, geographical world-views should accept the basic principles of modern and late-modern ways of constructing social realities. In this context, I believe and observe that traditional geography is increasingly losing touch with socio-cultural realities and becoming an anti-modern enterprise. This is particularly true of traditional regional geography as established by Alfred Hettner and Vidal de la Blache. More generally, this critique applies to all space-centered approaches in geography, which are still practiced by many geographers and still prevail in schoolbooks. The aforementioned paper can be seen as an alternative to space-centered approaches and, certainly, as an alternative use of phenomenology for geographical research when compared to humanist geographers' proposals and their ambition to rehabilitate Vidalian geography. The question here is whether the 19th century's framework of geographical research is an adequate tool to deal with entirely new geographical conditions that have crystalized in the "globalization" phenomenon, changing the geographical conditions of action very radically.

In my view, most geographical world representations and analysis use spatial categories as the primary categories for "classification" — the typifying description of the socio-cultural world. The first step here is to develop *spatial* categories and, subsequently, classifying empirically observable *social* phenomena according to these categories. In other words, the categories are often spatial or "natural" — in the sense that they refer to bio-geophysical features or criteria — yet, they are then used to make statements about the socio-cultural phenomena of the area under investigation. This area is then constructed as a "region" with "typical" features and phenomena.



Such a space-centered approach means investigating an area as if it were a container for objects, artifacts, people, social phenomena, and so forth. That is, you would, for example, look at Brazil, Europe, or France, or whichever country or region you want to define as a "spatial unit," and ask what is "inside it." This is an example of the application of the Newtonian container space to socio-cultural realities. This has always been problematic, but it is especially problematic under late-modern, globalized conditions.

My first point is that, epistemologically, these frameworks of geographical research have always been highly debatable. Empirically, they are not that problematic as long as they are applied to traditional cultures or organizations, or — to a certain extent — even to nation states. Nation states are constituted on the basis of normatively appropriated spatial categories. If the social is organized in spatial categories (as with the nation state's territorial organization), or if traditions have fixed the meaning attributed to certain places, locales, and spaces (as with traditional societies and cultures), then spatial descriptions are not actually a major problem. However, they become problematic in all other socio-cultural contexts, especially with a growing range of subjective decisions. As soon as people are culturally mixed and have different cultural backgrounds, the attribution of meaning to place and space is based on subjectively, and not traditionally, constituted life forms. In short, under late-modern living conditions, the use of spatial categories as primary categories of description becomes highly problematic. The basic structure of this kind of problem is expressed in nationalist or regionalist statements like "a Brazilian has to be X," "all French people are Y," "you will find that people from Germany share the feature Z," and so on. The two main implications of this are, first of all, an arbitrary homogenization of the socio-cultural, thus excluding or undermining the subjective, and, second, the marginalization of people who do not seem to fit into the categories of arbitrary homogenization.

At the time when I was writing the paper, the Balkan War was still on. In that war, for me all the discourses on ethnic cleansing had exactly the same logic as traditional or, better, traditionalistic geography. For instance, "This is Serbian territory — all Croats and all other people have to leave. If you don't leave voluntarily, we will deport you, or we kill you". I found this the anti-modern implication of traditionalistic geography: a pre-modern view of the world in respect of modern and late-modern realities, with a strong normative impetus, very close to the well-known blood and soil ideologies.

One can say that, historically, geography gained its importance or, more

precisely, its status as a scientific discipline in the context of nation-building. This had multiple dimensions. For one thing, it was very important — and productive — for people to know about other places in the nation state. For another, it also mobilized nationalist feelings. You read the lyrics of national anthems and you become aware that most of them mention physical geographical features, glorify rocks, rivers or mountains as having a national meaning. It is about the nationalization of nature, the expression of a fixed cultural appropriation of nature — very much in the sense of traditional societies and a pre-condition for space-centered geographical representations.

You read the lyrics of national anthems and you become aware that most of them mention physical geographical features, glorify rocks, rivers or mountains as having a national meaning. It is about the nationalization of nature, the expression of a fixed cultural appropriation of nature

If you regard the attribution of subjective meaning as an important element of human freedom or even integrity, the reactionary potential of traditionalistic geography becomes obvious. The normative implications of national or regional characterizations of social actors even have fundamentalist implications. Fundamentalist discourses do not accept subjective interpretations. They regard traditionally fixed interpretations as the only acceptable ones. Everything that does not conform to their interpretations has to be excluded, even denigrated in certain circumstances. This is one of the reasons why I think we need new geographical perspectives for new living conditions. We need new geographical descriptions and a new geographical understanding of the world.

The reification of culture by way of space-centered representations of reality in the style of nationalistic discourses will thus probably be one of the central problems of the future, because its basis in the everyday life-world is being progressively eroded. A comparison of traditional geographical research on cultural realms with regionalist, nationalistic, and related fundamentalist patterns of argumentation allows us to recognize a frightening similarity. Such repercussions for socio-political everyday realities are, sometimes, of literally explosive relevance. I consider their overcoming to be the central challenge facing human geography.

The question of the implications of this for urban planning and public policies is a very ambitious one. I do not know what exactly you are referring to when you mention “public policies.” Of course, immigration, loans, and things like

that are probably all part of it. However, with regard to urban planning, I would say that, of course, you need a coordinated and ordered life. Here, as secondary categories, spatial categories are certainly of central importance. Nonetheless, the limits of urban planning are obvious if you the global circulation of capital invested in immobile objects like housing and so on. The question then is: How powerful are the instruments of urban planning in order to counter the local effects of the global circulation of capital?

It is probably no longer sufficient to think of urban planning in local, regional, or national categories. You also have to undertake urban planning in the context of global interconnectedness, especially in places like São Paulo, but probably even in smaller places. The "creative city" concept can be seen as an indicator of how urban realities are increasingly constructed ones. This finds its expression in the move from "la lutte des classes à la lutte des places," as so pointedly expressed in Michel Lussault's book[8] with this title. There will be more competition between places in the future, because the globalization tools make many things the same at different places. However, not all differences will be obliterated, of course, because a city needs one or more distinguishing features if it wants to attract certain people and businesses.

Consequently, urban planning will certainly have a much closer link to cultural studies, social studies, and image studies in the sense of meaning construction in a coherent, historical way. The point in this respect seems to be that you cannot construct an image deliberately. You have to take the history of a place into account. It has to be coherent. Therefore, historical, social, and cultural geographers are asked to construct the distinctiveness of the place from its local and regional history. I guess the construction of meaningful symbolic place images will play a far more important role than it has done so far.

BCG: You criticize regionalism and nationalism. While they can simultaneously lead to totalitarianism and distorted visions of reality, they can also represent a form of resistance to the ills of a perverse globalization, precisely because they are based on the solidarities within the place. In your opinion, should these kinds of resistance — regionalism, nationalism — ever be abandoned? What is your position given movements like those that claim independence for their territories?

Benno Werlen: That's again a very interesting, important, but also complicated question. First of all, if we are arguing against nationalism and

8 LUSSAULT, Michel. *De la lutte des classes à la lutte des places*. Paris: Ed. Grasset, 2009.

regionalism, I have already partly explained the background and the context in the answer to the previous question, specifically regarding excluding and pejorative forms of nationalism and regionalism. If you say, “I am from São Paulo, I feel like someone from São Paulo, and I like this place,” this is simply the (positive) expression of a feeling of belonging. But if you were to say, “all people not born in São Paulo have to leave the place,” then it would become as problematic as the current discourses of the far right in Europe. This is one side. The other aspect of your question addresses regional independence. If this implies the idea that one can really change the world for all the inhabitants of a certain territory by claiming regional independence, then I would be very careful with this under globalized geographical living conditions.

Of course there is a right to self-determination. But it is very helpful to recognize the Janus-faced character of nationalism and regionalism. On the one hand, such movements claim self-determination; they defend their right to choose. On the other hand, the way their claims are constructed, produced, and implemented is quite complicated, sometimes even highly contradictory. First of all, in all analyzed cases, the “we” is in fact an “I.” People speak in the name of the population of a certain region, but it is in fact an “I,”; it is the royal “we,” a “*pluralis majestatis.*” The crucial point is that somebody claiming to represent the interests of an entire community (however defined) has very often not been legitimized by the community. If he or she has that legitimization, there is politically speaking absolutely no problem. Everybody can defend his or her self-interest by legal means, without a doubt. But if somebody mentions "we," and this "we" is merely used for his or her own advantage, then I think it is the duty of the social geographers to point a finger. At the very least, this is a very complicated case of self-autonomy. If somebody just claims that s/he is defending the rights of others, and s/he is actually pursuing his or her self-interest, then we have to be careful. In this case, the royal “we” is neither an adequate tool of liberation, nor an adequate tool of self-determination, or a sound basis for solidarity.

As I emphasized in the answer to the first question, action-centered geography has an explicit sensitivity to the need for social solidarity without undermining the potential of subjective decision-making. And as I also pointed out, local and regional conditions are of great importance for the implementation of intentions and choices. There is, of course, also a need to maintain livable local and regional conditions. But it is doubtful that regionalist and nationalistic discourses are appropriate ways to establish a sound social solidarity. These discourses are unlikely to overcome or avoid the mentioned perverse effects of globalization

under globalized regional and local conditions.

BCG: In some papers, you point out that the object of geography should be to analyze the everyday production of geographies produced through social action. Thus, what implications for a general theory or a greater theory of geography can we construct from the analysis of social movements emerging from the European financial crises and the Arab world insurrections?

Benno Werlen: The theoretical frame of action-centered geography can help discover the rationale behind these movements, as well as provide an analytical frame. It is, in my view, necessary to learn from these social movements and to include them in the process of theorizing. I will return to this later. In order to answer your question it is — in my view — first of all helpful to talk about the object of scientific geography. We have the situation that geography has never developed a social theory that takes both social agency and spatial conditions seriously. On the one hand, there were and still are geo-deterministic theories of societies and cultures that undermine all aspects of agency. Such theories consider human activities as mere effects of natural causes with little or no intentionality by the acting subject. On the other hand, there is the "spatialization" or "geographizations" of general social theories, which simply puts them "in" geographical space with little or no further considerations. Many of the interpretations of and applications to geographical issues of Henri Lefebvre's "La production de l'espace" fall in that second category.

At least since the work by Max Weber, the social sciences have faced the problem of the exclusion of the spatial aspect from social practice or action theories. The best-known exceptions are, as already mentioned, Bourdieu and Giddens. However, both refer to space as geographical (earth) space. My point is that all types of spatial concepts are the outcome of theoretical reflection. Moreover, geographical (earth) space is the outcome of a theoretical work, but not so much of geographers, and certainly not of social scientist, but first and foremost of sixteenth and seventeenth century natural scientists. First of all, I here think of physics, especially mechanics and the Newtonian container space. And, second, I think of biological ecology — as established by Ernst Haeckel — with its notion of a "living space" or "ecological niche." Both concepts, container space and living space, are theoretically constructed types of spaces — not for social action or practice purposes, but for purposes of mechanics or the ecology of life forms. Both types are characterized by "space" being seen as having an existence in and of itself. Newton as well as Haeckel made this claim, which traditional geographers

also do regarding the social and the cultural.

The first step in the development of a geographical theory of globalized social realities is the elaboration of spatial concepts that are not just borrowed from the natural sciences, but are concepts that relate specifically to social action and social practice. It is very important to get this right in the first place. If not, we will have to deal with all sorts of "biologizations" and "naturalizations" of the socio-cultural worlds of racists, blood and soil, imperialistic, or similar types later on. This would be a rather regressive step because it would mean reverting to traditional geo-deterministic socio-cultural theories. I developed a three-pronged concept of action-related concepts of space for action-centered social geography, or better: I identified the applicability of concepts of space for specific types of social actions, as well as the criteria for each of these applications. This concept comprises purpose-rational actions (a metric concept of space), norm-oriented actions (a territorial concept of space), and the most encompassing type, the meaning-oriented action (symbolic).

I identified the applicability of concepts of space for specific types of social actions, as well as the criteria for each of these applications. This concept comprises purpose-rational actions (a metric concept of space), norm-oriented actions (a territorial concept of space), and the most encompassing type, the meaning-oriented action (symbolic)

Here, "space" is understood as a very specific concept, as being formal, relational, and classificatory at the same time. Each of these dimensions — and that is an important point — has a specific interpretation depending on the type of action. These dimensions constitute metric space for rational calculation; for normative consideration, including legislation and surveillance, these dimensions combine to form the spatial notion of the "territory." In contrast to the first two action-related concepts of space, the symbolic interpretation of space follows a different logic. The territory is associated with the metric because we need a clear delimitation of the territory. The symbolic, however, has neither a metric aspect, nor a clear delimitation; it does not have an absolute point of origin like the metric, and it does not have clearly defined borders like the territory. The meaning of the spatial changes depends on what we are doing. Taking this as a starting point, the project can be brought to the next level of geographical questioning.

The idea of space as a constitutive force for society is frequently postulated.

According to the action-centered perspective, we — as geographers — should investigate different societies and cultures in the history of humankind and the ways they dealt with the corporeality and, hence, the spatiality of social agents and circumstances of acting. How do societies act over distance and how do subjects interact with other subjects with whom they are not familiar? And how are physical objects — here, again, Milton Santos's topic — integrated into use in action sequences? The answers to these kinds of questions should help advance our understanding of the extent to which different forms of societies are expressions of socially established forms of mastering of the spatiality and corporeality of human life. And these answers may become very important in respect of the question: How can society be constituted in the globalized digital age?

Geographically, we can distinguish between different social forms in this respect, or we can even say that the idea of the social and of society is totally linked to the particular ways that the spatiality of human life is mastered: Only if it is possible to interact with non-present, spatially distant actors, can a social world be established in the sense of society. This is the key element of the distinction between "community" (Gemeinschaft) and "society" (Gesellschaft). Analyzing human history from this perspective shows that the three oft-cited revolutions, Neolithic, Industrial, and Digital, also mark three key steps in mastering the spatiality of human life.

We don't even know if, in a few decades from now, the idea of society will still be maintained in its present form. We have new technical means to master spatiality at our disposal, but we have absolutely no idea about their implications for society's constitution.

Presently, we are in the midst of the Digital Revolution, which is totally changing the established ways of mastering spatiality as a basic condition of society. We don't even know if, in a few decades from now, the idea of society will still be maintained in its present form. We have new technical means to master spatiality at our disposal, but we have absolutely no idea about their implications for society's constitution. We should also think about how to change our social organization or, more generally, what society could look like after the Digital Revolution, at the end of the present era that has been dominated by territorial logic.

I think the movements that you mentioned in your question express the recognition that traditional forms of social control are linked to territories that no

longer work properly due to the disembedding process of globalization. The new social movements express a quest for other forms of social cooperation and regulation or, even, new forms of geography-making based on internet and mobile phone communication, etc., as well as new forms of democratization by means of video surveillance, for instance, on the youtube platform, and the democratization of knowledge through Wikipedia, etc. The addressed movements are, at least to a certain extent, drawing attention to the practices of the construction of geographical realities in a non space-centered way, opening avenues for alternative ways of making geographical realities on the basis of alternative practices. In fact, the mentioned movements are drawing attention to the way geographical realities are produced as meaningful geographical realities under late-modern conditions. These movements are at the same time an illustration of what I called the "empowerment" of subjects as actors. Almost all of the existing forms of regulation are linked to the territorial logic and constitution of society, and this logic is in crisis due to the increasing social impact of globalization and the Digital Revolution's disembedding mechanism. My 2010 book "Gesellschaftliche Räumlichkeit" (Social spatiality) addresses these topics more systematically and more substantially. I hope that this short summary has given you a rough idea of action-centered geography's program in its latest development.

BCG: In your "theory of action," you mention the study of a "geography of information" and a "geography of signification." Do you know any research based on this approach? What is your view of the inclusion of the category "information" in geography to date?

Benno Werlen: The action-centered approach has mainly been applied in the German-speaking context. There is quite some work going on at the level of Masters and PhD research, and there are also a number of research projects in Germany that build on my theoretical work and are funded by research foundations. Before I illustrate this type of geographical research direction, I would like to give a short description of the "regionalization" concept behind it and to which the "geography of information" and the "geography of signification" are linked.

In the context of action-centered geography, "regionalization" denotes a geographical imagination, a geographical world-view not based on the notion of physical or metric space, but constructed through processes that I call "Welt-Bindung," — "world bonding" or "world inclusion." By that I mean the ways in which we relate to the world, how we integrate elements of the socio-cultural, as

well as the bio-physical, world into our actions, the carrying out of our activities, our daily practices. Consequently, the question is not so much "what is" *in* the region containing space, but much more how subjects are regionalizing their life-worlds through the way they relate to the world. This corresponds to a subject and action- centered and not space-centered geographical world-view.

This understanding of "regionalization" takes the basic principle of the modern world-view, which assigns a central role to the acting subjects, into consideration. "World bonding" or "world-inclusion" addresses a practice of "re-embedding" through which the subjects, under globalized conditions, define or re-define the connection between themselves and the world. The concepts of "space" are of crucial importance for these connections, they are central of "world bonding" or "world-inclusion" tools. "World bonding"' or "world-inclusion"' can be characterized as "a form of social control of one's own and others' actions that varies in spatial and temporal expansion." This means, the further-reaching — spatially and temporally — the influence or control of an individual is, the greater is his or her ability to master space (spatio-temporal distance) and the better (hypothetically) his or her control of other people's actions is.



This points to a new direction for geographical research: Such research should not be concerned with the study of space or be conceptualized as (socio-)spatial analysis, but as a social and cultural science that analyzes the meaningful construction of geographical realities and its implications for the constitution of societies and cultures. In this context, three types of everyday regionalization can be distinguished: the consumptive-productive, the social-political and the informative-significative. Each of them involves a specific form of world bonding/inclusion, a specific form of power, and a specific concept of space.

The geographies of information and the geographies of signification that you raised in your question have to be considered in this context and I will now turn to the application of this theoretical framework. The research team at the Department of Geography at the University of Jena studied the geographies of information and

signification by analyzing a TV series about the history of the so-called Central Germany ("Mitteldeutschland"). We examined how the series produced the spatial unity of central Germany, a territorial unit that has continually changed its spatial expansion over the course of centuries. We investigated how and what kind of information — scientific and non-scientific — had been gathered in the design and production phases of the series, and how symbolic meanings had been attributed to them in order to create a unity of the three politically and administratively distinct federal states Thuringia, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt, which together form the construct called "Mitteldeutschland."

This process of "unity formation" started at the end of the 1990s after the fall of the wall, the so-called German re-unification, and saw "Central Germany" emerge as a powerful identity-establishing concept, not least due to its repeated, and you might say relentless, use by various media. The logic behind the construction of a new territorial unit is quite obvious. First, the media advocated the just mentioned unity of the three states and presented the history of this region as a history of Central Germany, even if all the historical actors at the time couldn't have imagined something like "Mitteldeutschland." Various cultural "products" were all presented as Central German products: classical music by Johann Sebastian Bach, the classic writings of Goethe and Schiller, the German Romantic Movement, the philosophy of Hegel, German Idealism, the Ph.D. of Karl Marx, Nietzsche's philosophy, the work of the Bauhaus group, the Audi production units (formally known as Horch), and the list of historical achievements at places like Leipzig, Weimar, Jena, etc.

The events at these places were highlighted as historical events, and even the history of these places — from the Neolithic to the present — was used to invoke the image of the seemingly inevitable formation of Central Germany and to generate a positive image, and some kind of regional or "collective" identity. This is just one example that illustrates the links between information and the attribution of symbolic meanings as a form of informative-significative everyday regionalization. More generally, this example illustrates a process that has been very important in the formation of nation states, and particularly in the formation of national identities. One can recognize that a large part of nationalism is based on a similar attribution of meaning to physical facts, such as in the glorification of natural features as symbols of national identity with the associated symbolic language.

In sum, the geography of information analyzes what kind of information the media (TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, books, etc.) are diffusing and how

people interpret the world on that basis and on the basis of specific semantic rules. The basic idea is that the meanings we attribute are based on what we know about it and on the means by which we obtain that information. The most powerful politics is the politics of information and interpretation. Many people know this, of course. This is the highest level of control because it determines the way people see things or, more precisely, people construct the world as a world with specific significations. If people don't agree with a certain given interpretation, then certain policies and certain economic forms can't be established. This is therefore the highest and the most powerful level of a geographical interpretation of the world, the most powerful world-bonding, world-inclusion.

The meanings we attribute are based on what we know about it and on the means by which we obtain that information. The most powerful politics is the politics of information and interpretation.

BCG: In an extremely interesting talk on the consumerism sphere, you mentioned that lifestyles have strong implications for the global economic structure. What do you think of one of cultural industry's strategies, which is based on the commodification of the inner elements of ways of life, such as regional festivities, traditional foods, clothes, music, etc.?

Benno Werlen: Let me first of all concentrate on the new aspects of the interconnectedness of consumption and production and then make shorter comments on the commodification of traditional cultural elements. Individual consumption and production decisions have become increasingly important with the change in the geographical conditions regarding the constitution of societies and cultures in the form of globalization, the colonizing of traditional ways of life, and the increasing spatial extent and complexity of global value chains. More than ever before, production appears to be demand-driven rather than the other way around. Until recently, consumption depended on what was available; consumers' choices were strongly limited by decisions in the production process. In contrast, in today's consumer culture there seems to be an almost unlimited array of products and services that fulfill the same purpose. Just take any ordinary supermarket as an example. You can choose between various kinds of bottled water or between various kinds of cheese, and so on. What I am saying here, is that there is a culturalization of life and a subjectivation of culture. This is one of the consequences of modernity, whether you like it or not. I am not saying that this is

something positive, but this may be a pertinent way to look at it, to obtain a more appropriate geographical understanding than would be possible through a space-centered geographical perspective.

Talking about culturalization implies emphasizing the formation and attribution of meanings according to subjectively constituted life forms. In turn, such meaning attributions strongly influence consumption patterns and, consequently, also the transformation of nature. If production depends increasingly on subjective, life-style-related and life-style-shaping decisions, the result is that life-styles are determinant for the way we transform nature. One of the implications of this is certainly that we need culturally differentiated approaches to sustainability, or even a new concept of sustainability. And this would again have significant implications for environmental policies at all governance levels — from the local to the global level.

(…) life-styles are determinant for the way we transform nature. One of the implications of this is certainly that we need culturally differentiated approaches to sustainability, or even a new concept of sustainability.

Local consumers don't normally see the distant (ecological) implication of their consumption, don't see places where all the metals and all the basic materials for a mobile phone, for example, are extracted, and probably don't know much about how a mobile phone is produced. We make our phone calls here, but we have no idea of where the elements are from and what ecological consequences the production and disposal of a mobile phone have. Because subjective decisions now have a strong impact on the world of production, we can say that consumers have quite some power — always, of course, within the range of each consumer's financial possibilities. Therefore, we note that many NGOs now evoke the politics of consumption. These NGOs are fighting for increasing transparency so allow consumers to receive more and higher-quality information on the ecological and social implications (like child labor, unfair wages and working conditions) of their buying decisions. This information work has become very important and, I believe, even powerful. It can be seen as a form of democratization of the economy. In any case, you can say that daily consumption decisions impact the transformation of nature — very often in distant places — considerably.

This (again) shows the power of the subject — the consumer in this case — and highlights individuals' potential to make a difference and to effect change on a large scale. The fact that this realm is often called "ethical consumption" highlights

its action-based geographical reality. “Ethics” and “ethical standards” assume that there is always more than one option to choose from; hence, it presupposes that there is always a possibility to act differently. Ethical standards can only apply to subjects with the potential to act. Therefore, all kinds of moral or ethical geographies presuppose the making of geographies by subjective agents and, hence, imply subjective agency.

This kind of “decision power” does not, of course, apply to all issues and domains of socio-economical and socio-cultural realities. I think the financial crisis is one example of an issue that is very difficult to change from the bottom up. Yet, bottom-up approaches might be the future of politics.

The last part of your question about the commodification of regional and local traditions can be understood as result of spatio-temporal distanciation, culturalization, and reification. Without going in too much detail here, I would say that this result strongly mirrors the traditional geographical worldview. Both build on the reification of the cultural, existing as something regionally or locally fixed with clear spatial demarcation. The “regional” and the “local” then quickly become the more authentic than the distant. This seems to be a very specific cultural industry strategy to produce “marketable” goods from (specific) ways of living and (specific) cultural products. Therefore, a first critical approach could be to decipher the marketing of specific ways as “authentic” by voiding them of all authenticity in the form of market goods. Whether the regional or local can a priori be “more” authentic than other persons’ ways of living is, of course, a completely different question.

BCG: To conclude, a double question: how do you see the situation of geography currently and, from, from your point of view and an action-based social geography perspective, could you please point out what the central themes for a research agenda in human geography could be today?

Benno Werlen: So... how much time do I get for this (*laughs*)? You are asking a lot, but I will try to answer. I would say we now have many topics on global politics’ agenda that are essentially geographic ones. The whole global warming debate, the sustainability debate, all these debates are in fact about interactions with nature — I would prefer the formulation, the transformation of nature by human action. All these issues are action-related geographical topics, asking for alternative ways of geography-making on the everyday level.

The potential of geography to have something to say about the key questions

of the global situation is tremendous, especially as a critical science suggesting new solutions for new problems emerging from the tremendous changes in the geographical conditions. However, at the same time, the institutional set-up of geography is rather weak. I believe we have three sections of geography that are diverting from one other due to an accelerated specialization. In this situation, the centrifugal forces become the dominant ones. Departments are increasingly splitting into units with only loose cooperation. I would say that there has been a growth in competence over the last thirty years, but simultaneously there is also a marked increase in specialization and separation. There has not been much growth in competence regarding integrated views of different realities of life and their scientific investigation.

If you contemplate the outlook for geography in the current political situation, I think that the split into divisions is problematic or at least deplorable. Geography's strength used to be to focus on the interconnections between the human and physical parts and geographical methods. I am not saying that these interconnections were based on scientifically acceptable methodologies. From that point of view, the ongoing specialization even has its merits. But we don't need to throw the baby out with the bath water! We should regard our position as that of a cross-faculty discipline — simultaneously a member of the International Social Science Council and of the International Council for (Natural) Sciences. This is a quite special position from which to work on integrated approaches in new ways. Finding *new forms and new ways of integration* could be a major contribution to the scientific community.

I therefore regard the IGU Initiative for an "International Year of Global Understanding" (IYGU)[9] as a bridge builder, also for geography. It should help bring the social and natural sciences and the humanities together to jointly work on this because it is a very important matter to raise awareness or understanding of the global embeddedness of everybody's life, physically, socially and culturally. It is a new potential for geography but also a new potential for science itself in a highly politicized field of action. This view is confirmed by IYGU as a geographical project having engaged the three major scientific global umbrella organizations — the natural sciences (ICSU), the social sciences (ISSC), as well as philosophy and the humanities (CIPSH) — for the first time in history.

The potential of geography would be tremendous if we had a more adapted geographical view of the way people live in the world today. This specifically includes the elaboration of new geographical imaginations for new, unprecedented

9 Available at www.global-understanding.info.

geographical conditions. Geography has gained enormous potential through economic geography having learned from Economics, social geography having learned from Sociology, and physical geography from the natural sciences. We shouldn't turn these gains in scientific competence into a reason to split the discipline. We can and should build on it to find new ways of integration without the old problems of reducing the meaningful to the biological (racism) or the material (vulgar geo-determinism), the reification and hierarchization of cultures (imperialism), etc. We should use this integrative capacity of geography on a higher level of theoretical reflection. I believe this is worth working for.

Geography has gained enormous potential through economic geography having learned from Economics, social geography having learned from Sociology, and physical geography from the natural sciences. We shouldn't turn these gains in scientific competence into a reason to split the discipline.

Geography is increasingly losing its position in schools, at least in parts of the world. The International Geographical Union (IGU) regularly receives messages saying that geography is under pressure to keep its position in primary and secondary schools. I would say this is might be due to traditional geography still being taught in schools, and children and adolescents no longer see themselves as part of the world presented in schoolbooks. If you teach children sustainability, not by going into forests or national parks, but instead by taking them to a supermarket and telling them about sustainability — telling them what the ecological impact of their choices is, whether they buy something or not — then young people will probably regard themselves from a geographical view and as geographical actors.

The more people are connected to each other globally, the more the need for geographical competence becomes obvious. Some think exactly the opposite: Because everything has become increasingly connected, the less important geography is; some even mention the "end of geography" on the institutional, as well as on the everyday level. But I would say that, in principle, geography is more important than ever before. But scientific geography could be better prepared for this.

Concerning the research agenda, I can just emphasize what I said before: Spatial relations, social spatial relations, socially constructed spatial relations and their implications for the construction of the social world could be the core fields of scientific geographical research in an action-centered, or, as you call it, an

What could society look like after the end — or at least the more limited importance — of territoriality, in the age after the Digital Revolution?

action-based perspective. The results could contribute to one of the perhaps most important future questions: What could society look like after the end — or at least the more limited importance — of territoriality, in the age after the Digital Revolution? The results could also transform political views. Most societies are still predominantly organized in national institutions, calling for national negotiations, or "inter-national" negotiations. We have problems that transcend the nation state's borders and which are beyond mere national concern. We need science to transcend disciplinary and interdisciplinary logic. We need a transnational discussion of the problems we live with and we need a trans-disciplinary view of these problems. Geography could — not in a traditional way, but in new ways — be a solid bridge builder. I hope that this can become geography's true and strongest potential.

* * *

About the interviewee

Benno Werlen, a swiss geographer, is a renowned theorist in German-speaking geography, and is also internationally recognized, especially due to his main work, "Society, Space and Action". Having studied at Fribourg, Kiel and Zurich universities, he is currently lecturing at University of Jena, in Germany, in addiction to having relevant participation in some international institutions, such as the European Research Council and the International Geographical Union (IGU), by means of which he currently develops the "Initiative for Global Understanding" project, of which he is the director.

BCG: http://agbcampinas.com.br/bcg

Interview carried out in November 2012.
Revision: Prof. Fabio Betioli Contel (FFLCH/USP)