CHICAGO AND L.A.: A CLASH OF EPISTEMOLOGIES[1]

Richard Shearmur[2]
INRS-UCS
Université du Québec
Québec, Canada

Abstract: The Chicago and L.A. Schools of Urban Studies are often contrasted with one another. At one level, the contrast is obvious: studies of late-20th century Los Angeles are clearly going to produce empirical results and observations that differ from studies of early-20th century Chicago. At another level, the contrast reflects a clash of epistemologies. On the one hand, there is a long tradition of urban studies based on the scientific method, and much of this can be traced back to the Chicago School's pioneering methodological and epistemological explorations. On the other hand, there is a more recent body of research that takes a postmodern approach to knowledge (a type of approach, it can be argued, that continues to underpin the more current cultural turn in geography) first introduced into urban geography by the L.A. School. In this essay, I briefly comment on the empirical differences between L.A. and Chicago research, and show how this leads to the epistemological debate. I then focus my attention on the way in which knowledge is acquired under modern and postmodern stances. I argue that, within the realms of academic research, the "scientific method," although rejected by postmodernists, often underpins the research of those who reject it. [Key words: postmodernism, cultural turn, scientific method, Los Angeles, Chicago.]

CHICAGO AND L.A.: PLACES OR CONNECTED IDEAS?

Although groups of researchers and intellectuals are periodically grouped together under "schools of thought," it is no simple matter to determine the contours, existence, or nature of such schools. A "school" is sometimes a convenient shorthand label used to designate a group of connected ideas, and sometimes the description of a locale from which ideas emanate. Under the second rubric, there is no *a priori* reason for ideas grouped together because they emanate from a particular place to be connected—in terms of their content—in any way.

The Chicago and L.A. Schools of Urban Studies are certainly schools of the second type: at particular times, innovative and dynamic researchers and writers in the field of urban studies happened to emerge—in the 1920s and 1930s in Chicago, and in the 1980s

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[2]Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Richard Shearmur, INRS-UCS, Université du Québec, 385 Sherbrooke, Montréal H2X 1E3, Canada; telephone: 514-499-4052; fax: 514-499-4065; e-mail: Richard.shearmur@ucs.inrs.ca

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and 1990s in Los Angeles. They are also, I will argue, schools of the first type, and it is the nature of the ideas that each school has tended to develop that truly sets them apart.

During the 1920s, the Chicago school innovated in two ways. First, from an epistemological and methodological perspective, it applied evidence-based research approaches (the "scientific method") to the social scientific study of cities. And second, it produced detailed knowledge of a particular city—Chicago—that was at the forefront of trends in urban development: it was the transport hub for the entire Midwest, the scene of innovative industrial, social, and architectural trends, and growing rapidly.

In the 1980s, much the same can be said about the Los Angeles School. From an epistemological perspective, some of its key proponents, led by Michael Dear and Edward Soja, adopted a postmodern approach to understanding the city. From an empirical perspective, it produced detailed knowledge of one of the world's largest, most automobile-dependent, and most multi-ethnic cities.

In order to assess the impact of these schools, one must attempt to abstract from specific findings. For example, the precise nature of the concentric rings described by Burgess (1925) is of historic interest. However, the notions that centrality is an organizing factor, and that organizing factors can be identified, is a far more enduring legacy. Similarly, the precise location of scattered employment in Los Angeles (Gordon and Richardson, 1996)[3] will be of historic interest in a few years. The extension of this observation to "keno capitalism" (the random location of urban activity; Dear and Flusty, 2002a), in other words to the idea that there are no longer any organizing processes that play out at the urban scale, is potentially far more important to the way in which we, as urban researchers, conceptualize cities.

In this essay, I will briefly comment on some empirical evidence concerning the nature of 21st century cities (I have discussed this elsewhere; Shearmur and Charron, 2004; Shearmur et al., 2007), and spend considerably more time discussing what I consider to be the fundamental difference between the Chicago and L.A. Schools—one of epistemology and research methods.

A Few Comments on Empirical Results

Los Angeles is often described as a postmodern city. By this is meant that it displays no particular spatial structures, that few if any general processes can be called upon to understand it, and that it can only be approached by observing one facet, and listening to one voice, at a time. In the field I am familiar with—that of urban economic geography—this is exemplified by the fact that employment appears to be scattering across the L.A. metropolitan area. It is no longer agglomerating at employment nodes and there is no clearly identifiable city center (Gordon and Richardson, 1996). This has been generalized, and it is sometimes claimed that other cities, particularly at their fast-growing suburban margins, are following in L.A.'s footsteps (Ingram, 1998).

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[3]To my knowledge Gordon and Richardson have no association with the L.A. School (though they are from L.A.) and their work is, if anything, closer to the Chicago tradition. However, the type of empirical observations they made on Los Angeles lends plausibility to the theorizations of Dear and Flusty.

Detailed empirical work on Canadian cities reveals, however, that scatteration and apparent disorganization can be observed at some scales (city blocks and small neighborhoods), that more ordered employment gain or loss from employment centers can be observed at other scales (census tract), and that strong and coherent organizing patterns and dynamics can be observed at the scale of the metropolis. In short, when urban economic geography is considered, far from being disorganized cities behave as chaotic systems. There exist probabilistic structures at micro-levels that lead to apparent chaos on the ground, but these resolve at broader scales into spatially stable (or rather, slowly evolving) metropolitan areas (Shearmur et al., 2007).

This, in turn, leads us to the central epistemological debate. Researchers in the Chicago School tradition believe it is worthwhile to look for regularities that reflect theoretical models, and they also seek to theorize the regularities they observe. In this manner, theories evolve, and knowledge is derived that is transmissible and that can, always with qualification, be generalized. Hence, even faced with apparent chaos in the Canadian data, belief in the existence of regularities led us to modify our theoretical stance, to introduce chaos theory and scale, and to thereby suggest a different way of understanding the data.[4] From a postmodern perspective, as I will elaborate below, chaos is expected, but only without any larger-scale organizing processes to govern it.

L.A. *appears* sprawling and chaotic, and many members of the L.A. School believe that therefore it *is*. The L.A. School itself has existential problems: with schools of thought being a type of structure, Ethington and Meeker (2002) wondered whether there was such a thing as an "L.A. School." This desire to actively *not* see structures anywhere, and the belief that the world around us is piecemeal and chaotic, though not necessarily endorsed by all urban researchers in L.A., nevertheless characterizes much of the thought associated with the L.A. (anti-)School's principal (non-)proponents. For that reason I now turn to postmodern geography itself which, as I see it, is associated with Los Angeles not only as a physical city, but also as a school of thought with its own way of acquiring knowledge.

Why Discuss Postmoderism?

To the extent that postmodern thought is associated with poststructuralism and literary deconstruction, it has been around for a long time, at least since the late 1960s. In geography, the idea of the postmodern city (of which Los Angeles is often taken to be the foremost example) and of postmodern geography dates from the early to mid-1980s (Soja, 1989). As mentioned above, a "school"—or anti-school—of postmodern geography (Dear and Flusty, 2002b) blossomed in Los Angeles during the 1990s, and it could be argued that geography has moved on to other things (Bédard, 2000; Chivallon, 2001; Barnes, 2003). However, many of the postmodern ideas that I take issue with have been taken up by geographers of the cultural turn (Barnes, 2003). Therefore, even if my

[4]I would like to strongly emphasize that our belief in regularities *made us look for them*. These regularities exist independently of our belief: we demonstrate their existence by having recourse to explicit statistical analysis, and our results remain open to criticism should our methods be somehow wanting.

arguments are couched in terms of postmodernism, I believe they are also relevant with regard to the current cultural turn in geography.

There are additional reasons to tackle the legacy of postmodernism and the L.A. school. Postmodern approaches to geography have disseminated and are currently being applied (to the extent that application is possible) by students engaged in the practical endeavor of obtaining advanced degrees. From a research and policy perspective, Los Angeles is still presented as a paradigmatic postmodern city. Finally, some central questions raised by postmodern geographers remain unanswered. For these four reasons—(1) the continued relevance of postmodern thought and its close connection with the cultural turn; (2) students engaging with these ideas; (3) L.A. as a paradigm; and (4) remaining questions—postmodern ideas remain relevant and worth discussing.

As my brief discussion of empirical trends makes clear, I am addressing these ideas from the position of an empirical researcher and economic geographer. This does not mean that my work is devoid of theory, that I am "[elevating] empirico-statistical regularity … to causation" (Soja, 2000, p. 190); it means that my emphasis is on the empirical verification and exploration of theory. I have only become involved in these wider debates because claims are being made by other geographers about things I do. Though many researchers shrug off the "ism" or turn of the day and get on with their work, the cumulative effect of these shrugs is that the voices of people actively engaged in applied research are not heard in these lofty debates. In a modest way, and stimulated by the fact that postmodernist claims fly in the face of my own practical experience, I will try to address some of them. I am under no illusion that the points I raise are particularly original: great thinkers have addressed postmodern ideas, and many similar debates are ongoing in the new cultural geography and elsewhere (Barnes, 2003). However, although epistemologists and geographic theorists may find not my ideas original, they reflect the experience and tentative conclusions of an empirical researcher who is trying to make sense of their abstract pronouncements.

Two Questions Raised by Postmodern Geography

The fundamental question posed by work in geography identified as postmodern (and principally by Dear and Flusty, 2002b, and Dear, 2002, in their edited books) is one of epistemology: how can we have any knowledge of the world that surrounds us, bearing in mind the variety of positions and personal histories that serve to individualize each view of the world? Soja (1989, p. 2) expressed this by despairing at ever being able to describe observed geographies: "Every ambitious exercise in critical geographical description … provokes similar linguistic despair."[5] Dear (2005, p. 251) also questioned the possibility of constructing shared knowledge of the world when he wrote that "all ways of seeing are necessarily contingent and provisional." Quite so, but I will argue that some ways of seeing are more contingent and provisional than others, and that despair is unwarranted. The world around us is, to a great extent, intelligible.

[5]Similar to that expressed by Borges in a passage quoted by Soja (1989).

Another central tenet of postmodern geography—which encompasses a very heterogeneous and loosely defined body of work—seems to be its refusal to recognize any form of authority (methodological or otherwise), which leads to the idea of polyvocality. Not only should all voices be heard, but marginal voices (identified in opposition to an ill-defined hegemon) have prime of place. Soja and Hooper (2002) and Soja (1989) highlight this and see their purpose as drawing attention to marginalized voices—voices not listened to by the "hegemonic power [that] actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division that are advantageous to its continued empowerment" (p. 379). It is useful to briefly comment on these two ideas.

"The world is fundamentally unknowable" is a statement that is not difficult to accept. Depending on how it is interpreted, this proposition steers us back to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (ultimately the world is probabilistic), to Popper's falsification (nothing can be proved, only falsification is possible), to anthropology (each society has its own norms, classifications, and ways of being), and to many other ways of thinking about the world. The question of "knowability" is not new: Descartes finally concluded that the only thing he could be certain of is that "I" exists, because "I" is thinking. If one ventures beyond these narrow confines, the sheer size and complexity of the world, and the innumerable dimensions and ways of comprehending it, may indeed lead one to despair.

Turning to the second idea, it is difficult to deny that all voices have the right to express themselves. Whether all should necessarily be listened to is more debatable. Indeed, as Ethington and Meeker (2002, p. 417) pointed out, postmodern geographers do *not* "suggest that all perspectives on a city are equally valid or that no one has gotten it wrong." The problem is that postmodern geographers provide no theoretical vocabulary or method that permits the "right" to be distinguished from the "wrong." We are therefore left in a quandary: is postmodern geography asking us to fumble around listening to everyone and everything, widening our collection of anecdotes and good stories but finally obtaining no cumulative and transmissible knowledge? Or should we try to establish some basic pointers that allow us to assess and process the information we receive—in which case we cease to be polyvocal because we select certain voices according to our criteria and give less weight to others.

In sum, and in response to these ideas that are central to postmoderism, two questions are raised. First, if the world is fundamentally unknowable and all knowledge is contingent, should we not abandon all efforts at acquiring knowledge, these efforts in any case being futile? And second, unless one decides to abandon all attempts at assessing the validity of knowledge claims (in which case readers may wish to reconsider their careers as academics), how *does* one separate the "right" from the "wrong"? The next two sections discuss each of these questions in turn.

On the Possibility of Knowledge

Even if the world is not knowable, much can be known about the world. The world is not knowable as a whole: there can be no "grand theory of everything," probably not even a "grand theory of the urban," at least not grand theories that can be verified. But as a geographer engaged in empirical research, I view the world from the other side of the looking glass.

Unlike Alice, bewildered by all she sees and uncertain of whom to listen to and how to interpret the multitude of voices she hears, I choose to verify my knowledge—somewhat like Descartes—starting from the bottom up. I begin with a particular facet of urban reality—the urban spatial economy—and make no claim to understand the city as a whole. However, I do claim to have some understanding of the facet I study and of how it interacts with other dimensions of the city, and this understanding is in direct conflict with the understanding claimed by some postmodern analysts. In short, when I read of a new theory that claims "urbanisation is occurring on a quasi-randsom field of opportunities. Capital touches down as if by chance on a parcel of land, ignoring opportunities on intervening lots" (Dear and Flusty, 2002a, p. 232),[6] I feel entitled to claim the theory is wrong. It overlooks the many empirical results that verify (but also qualify) more traditional location theory.

How can I make such a bold statement? I begin by observing that we all possess some knowledge of the world, much of which is uncontroversial. We can all agree, for instance, that crossing a busy street without looking will endanger our lives. We can even agree that crossing when the little White pedestrian is lit—a convention, but a widely recognized one—will greatly reduce the danger. Furthermore, if we jaywalk, we can use our knowledge of local drivers, traffic flows, and police officers to assess whether the risk is worth taking. As this process unfolds, we behave *as if* our knowledge were true. We are ready to live our lives *as if* there exists a reality, not only a physical one but a social one, constructed out of flashing lights and highway codes, external to ourselves. Moreover, we agree to such an extent on many aspects of this reality that we can even lead our lives on the assumption that other people share these beliefs and behave accordingly. Thus for all intents and purposes we "know" some very important elements of the world.

The example of crossing a street illustrates how one moves from very general knowledge—valid (except for the color and shape of the crossing signal) across most of the Western world—to more specific and contingent knowledge (how do drivers in this city react to jaywalking?). Postmodern despair and contingency are not to be dismissed; some things are not (yet?) amenable to generalization, and postmodern rhetoric has forcefully reminded us of that. What postmodern rhetoric seems to have forgotten, however, is that some things *are* amenable to differing degrees of generalization. It is not *all* knowledge that is so contingent and complex that it leads one to despair. Most people happily carry on their lives assuming that most social rules apply most of the time. Modern researchers use this to establish guarded generalizations that can be verified, and then combined to build complex probabilistic models of certain aspects the world (e.g., Farjoun and Machover, 1983). Such generalizations can, in turn, be useful in sorting out the general from the particular, and help in identifying individual features worthy of particular study.

Unless one wishes to constantly repeat the obvious—that there always are exceptions, that some knowledge is specific to certain times and places, that norms can evolve over time and are not the same in all societies—then one should admit that it is possible to obtain some knowledge on how society functions by identifying norms and commonly accepted rules of behavior. Indeed, whether one wishes to identify the hegemon (Soja and

[6]This is a description of "keno capitalism," mentioned in the opening paragraphs.

Hooper, 2002), the behavior of global capital (Dear and Flusty, 2002a), or exceptions to a theoretically derived model of income distribution across space (Shearmur and Charron, 2004), such knowledge of society is a basic building block.

The question, therefore, is not whether some knowledge of the social world can be obtained. It clearly can. Rather, the question is how should one go about gathering and assessing such knowledge? This is a basic question of epistemology and methodology to which I will return below; however, the scientific approach, which characterizes modern research, can provide some guidance. At its most abstract, this method can be said to consist of the gathering of information in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible way, and in the explicit description of analytical techniques, theories, observations and previous research that enables knowledge to be derived from it. This approach to knowledge characterizes the Chicago School.

To return to my own area of knowledge, it is because all systematic studies that explore the location of activities across urban space reveal theoretically consistent regularities in their location (at least at certain scales) that I disagree with Dear and Flusty's (2002a) theory of keno capitalism.

On Separating the "Right" From the "Wrong"

Behind the idea of polyvocality lies the laudable wish to ensure that hidden voices—particularly, but not exclusively, those of oppressed groups—be heard. In order to do this, two steps are necessary. First, oppressed groups must be identified. But this is more difficult than it looks, because it involves classifying people and identifying those who are considered oppressed. Without resorting to the scientific approach and to knowledge of the world[7] (the possibility of which, we must recall, postmodernists doubt), classifying groups of people is rather difficult (not to say impossible). Yet Soja and Hoopers (2002) attempt to speak "from the margin" in order to identify and explore different voices. To do this they set up an analytically useful device called hegemonic power. Although their definition of the hegemon is rather vague, their approach certainly rests on the fact that knowledge of the world (in this case, of the hegemon) is possible and that voices can be classified. In other words, they have no hesitation in defining groups and structures when it suits their purpose, but seem to question any groups or structures that may be traced to the hegemon.

This still leaves unexplored the criteria that may be used to separate those voices that add to our knowledge of the world from those that only add to its background noise. Although anathema to some avant-garde thinkers, this leads us to consider the nature of authority, and to recognize that traditional enlightenment approaches to research and knowledge acquisition may still have something going for them. Unless one actively embraces the idea of a new dark age (Jacobs, 2004) in which every preacher, hair-brained activist, and world leader can claim that his or her statements are true merely because they claim to believe them, then appeals to logic, to method, and to accumulated knowledge

[7]As well as being guided by a theory of oppression, this would involve messy empirical tasks such as gathering information on social groups, assessing the veracity of claims to oppression, defining the oppressor, explaining the criteria that allow oppression to be identified, and relentlessly questioning politically correct stereotypes.

and precedent are necessary. I will conclude with some remarks concerning this rather outdated agenda.

Some Thoughts on Authority, Polyvocality, and Scientific Method

Why should some voices carry more weight than others? I can think of two basic reasons. First, some voices base their statements on meticulous, transparent, and reproducible analysis. In the context of academic inquiry, such analysis lends authority. Of course, authority of other kinds can be derived from poetic vision, imagination, musicality, charisma, or political power, but these endeavors can hardly be characterized as academic inquiry or as attempts to obtain and interpret factual[8] knowledge of the world. The basis on which academics lay claim to knowledge is crucially important, *particularly for critical academics*, whose criticism of false claims made about the factual world (by, for instance, politicians) will only stand up if they can establish accepted criteria that distinguish fact from other types of information. Even if the absolute distinction of fact from other information is in some cases difficult, scientific criteria, developed over time and evolving gradually through discussion and confrontation of theory with empirical evidence, provide a basis for distinguishing factual information from other types. The blending of genres that one finds in postmodern texts is entertaining, but calls upon radically different types of authority that few of us (academics) are in a position to judge, and which have no bearing on academic inquiry. Just as I would refrain from claiming that my scientific technique makes me a good politician, so I venture to suggest that a politician's charisma and power do not lend authority to his or her statements on the location of economic activity within intrametropolitan space (nor, if recent history is anything to go by, on the location of weapons of mass destruction).

Second, and not unrelated to the first point, some voices have acquired authority over time (as have, for instance, the voices of Soja and Dear in urban geography). To take my own case as an example, the statement made above that "all systematic studies that explore the location of activities across urban space reveal theoretically consistent regularities in their location (at least at certain scales)" is not, in this paper, based on anything other than my authority. This authority, for what it is worth, derives from my demonstration to a knowledgeable readership, in peer-reviewed publications, that I have a good awareness of this area of knowledge and that I am able to conduct this type of study myself. Were a politician to make an equivalent unsupported statement on the subject, it would probably be taken rather more lightly. Polyvocality is a wonderful idea, but some voices carry more weight than others (in a given field and at a given time).

This does not mean that everyone will necessarily agree with my statement, nor that I, or Soja or Dear for that matter, are necessarily right because of our academic authority; it means that prudent people will go and check their facts before telling us that we are

[8]I use the word "factual" quite broadly: a social process, a norm, a probability, or an area of uncertainty can also be a fact. What makes them facts (as opposed to speculations, ideals, visions, hopes, lies, etc.) is that they have been verified in what I call a "scientific" way. From this perspective, a fact is not necessarily a certainty: it is verified information about which we have a good idea of the degree of uncertainty (which takes us back to Heisenberg, whose "fact" is the existence of probabilistic fields around atomic nuclei within which electrons can be found).

wrong. Such prudence would be an example of the scientific method and would lead to a factually based discussion. If, however, such prudence is considered superfluous by postmodern geographers—knowledge is so contingent that any voice goes—then maybe one should use a stronger word than polyvocality: maybe cacophony would do.

CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO CHICAGO AND L.A.

Los Angeles is a vast sprawling city, impossible to comprehend in its totality. The same can be said for Chicago, for any large city, and probably a similar claim could be made for any socioeconomic process that plays out over space. But whereas the L.A. School has embraced the vastness and complexity of its city, and concludes that no sense can be made of it, the Chicago School posits that many aspects of such a complex city can indeed be understood given empirical evidence and a methodical scientific approach.

The L.A. School, in its postmodern extreme, overstates the contingency, uniqueness, and lack of structuring processes that govern the economy and society of large cities, even Los Angeles. Maybe this is a rhetorical device to shake up members of the Chicago School who may, in the 1960s and 1970s, have overstated the precision, scope, and generality of the models, processes, and structures they identified. If so, the rhetoric is no longer necessary, since few proponents of the scientific method endorse anything that resembles the straightforward positivism that may have given the scientific method a bad name. Both Schools, L.A. and Chicago, have contributed to the richness and variety of scholarship in urban studies, and whatever the epistemological approach, many observations and insights made by researchers from both schools continue to add to our understanding of cities.

But having said that, I feel that the L.A. School, to the extent that it embraces a postmodern view of the world (and, to cast my net wider, I would also include the new cultural geography that emphasizes contingency and uniqueness of point of view, sometimes to the exclusion of all else), is headed toward a dead end. If all is unique, if each voice is given the same weight as the next, if each observation is as valid as the next, and if no shared knowledge of the world is possible, then we have reached the end of academic research—there is no longer anything to look for since everything (and hence nothing) is worthy of our attention, and in any case what I see is different from what anyone else will see.

The Chicago School (and here too, to cast my net more widely, I would also include all approaches that build upon the scientific method) is not above criticism either. There still exist disciplines (orthodox economics comes to mind; Dow, 2007; George, 2007) where a somewhat naïve quantitative determinism dominates, and this may indeed reflect its political usefulness (to the hegemon?) rather than scientific criteria or robust empirical evidence. However, in the realm of urban studies, where there has been a strong and lively discussion about method, epistemology, and the nature of knowledge since the 1970s, I would argue that few researchers, and certainly no school of thought, espouse such a one-dimensional view of method, or believe that absolute universal truths will be found. It is precisely because urban studies in the Chicago School tradition are evidence based, grapple with and acknowledge a complex and probabilistic reality, *and manage to make some sense of it*, that I feel they still have much to offer.

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