

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY  
COLLOQUIUM SERIES 2011-2012

## *Automated (Post) Positivism*

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For a half a century, the word "positivism" has been invested with meanings of methodological and political conservatism. Yet the shared reference point for the collective memories of urban geography and other social sciences -- the Fordist methodological positivism of the mid-twentieth century -- obscures an earlier radical history. The long-forgotten project launched by Auguste Comte in 1822 was hijacked and corrupted in the twentieth century, and today the informational innovations of digital capitalism are reanimating the corpse of Cold War positivism. Yet this reanimation is a dehumanized, automated adaptation to the poststructuralist situated epistemologies of consumer sovereignty, creating a strange hybrid zombie of the dashed hopes of Enlightenment modernity and the postpositivist relativism that goes back to a pre-Comtean metaphysics and (market) theology. Reclaiming the radical Comte is the first step in the fight against an aggressive, right-wing (post)positivist zombie reanimated by the neoliberal project.

Cartoon Room 1, Ohio Student Union, 3:30-5pm  
Thursday, March 8, 2012



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I Fought the Law and the Law ~~lost~~ Won :  
Living with ~~the first laws of~~ Geography's Laws

~~Laws of Geography: Repeat of First Law?~~

¶ Geographers of a certain age remember a time when  
our field could be ~~summed~~

described in short, decisive terms: ~~the Earth~~  
the Earth as the haven of humanity. The art and  
science of regional description. The study of  
~~space, place, and an~~

Spatial organization.

environment and spatial relations. And of course  
Waldo Tobler's famous "First Law of Geography":  
all things are related, but near things are  
more related than distant things.

¶ For many years now, ~~the first law of geography~~  
~~has been~~ ~~these that, clear~~

categorical

these concise descriptions have

been under ~~the~~ siege. ~~Geographers~~ Many geographers  
have shied away from definitive assertions of  
what ~~we~~ we do. The world seems to have  
become so much more complex, even as  
successive crises of representation have  
shaken the foundations of ~~the~~

what was (thought to be known) in the humanities,  
social sciences, and even major parts of the  
so-called "hard sciences."

~~Peter Galati, reminds the 1980s world that~~  
~~was formed by it and is a reminder of a geography~~

Must  
be  
at  
least  
in



~~experience~~  
~~of the familiar~~ ~~of the~~  
~~it~~

Describing what a geographer does hasn't gotten any easier in the years since Peter Gould (1985)

went to a cocktail party, ~~where he~~ ~~and found himself~~

~~asked he was a doctor, a~~  
~~suitor, or a trucker, or a tramp~~  
was asked the usual ~~"What do you do?"~~  
"A geographer? What do you do?"  
question, and suddenly wished he  
was a doctor... or a suitor... or a trucker...  
or a tramp. Everyone knows what they  
do. ~~Geographers~~

~~For geographers~~ Geographers? Today, we  
~~are~~ are paralyzed by the complexity of  
our worlds, and the  
~~complexity~~ overwhelming diversity of  
languages, ~~and methods~~  
methods and languages used to ~~create~~  
describe and live in those worlds. We are trapped  
by the freedoms of our ~~continent~~  
radical ~~openness~~ openness (Wolch, 2003; ~~Harvey~~  
Harvey, 2005).

~~I suggest that we can do much better~~

If we can do better. When called upon to explain what geographers do, ~~we should not~~ we should ~~not~~

give a clear, confident answer. ~~Geographers do many~~

~~things~~ While our radical openness and existential angst ~~are~~

are strengths -- they keep us modest and open to new ideas --

we can only earn public respect for these principles if we start off the conversation with a short ~~with many~~ declarative sentences. ~~We cannot~~  
~~be more than~~

~~Geography is connection.~~ Geography is connection.

The first law of geography is that all things are related, but near things are ~~related~~ more related than distant things. There's a lot of complexity ~~in~~ today, of course, and "near" or "distant" things ~~are~~ in the world

always seem to be tossed together like some gigantic planetary salad. But we still live with geography's first law. And we now know that it's not ~~about~~ like the laws of physics. This law is something that's ~~fast~~ worked at in legislatures, in the courts, and on the streets.



~~Geography~~

note

Studying geography is like going to law school  
to learn ~~the rules and conflicts over how~~

~~humanity lives in a changing world.~~  
the rules and conflicts over how  
humanity lives in a changing world.

there's an illustration from human geography. Not long ago,  
I took a early-morning flight out of YVR, an acronym  
that is all too familiar to many people around the world  
who fly to, from, or through a place called Vancouver.

Airports are strange places, where the concepts  
of "near" and "distant" are constantly in flux. Crowds mix  
in the ~~too~~ to and fro of the

crowded terminal, with human bodies ~~carefully~~  
carefully surveyed by up-close-and-personal  
security pat-downs

and ~~remove~~ please-remove-your-shoes

checkpoints. Then the ~~consumption~~ shopping opportunities  
of the consumption cornucopia beckon: the airport  
is a shopping mall, ~~with~~ ~~the~~  
~~and the customers~~ and its customers arrive from cities  
around the world. ~~the shoppers~~

Shoppers hustle, shuffle, and linger. Some  
have a few minutes before their flight to a

facebook

connecting



small town in the B.C. interior. Others fly  
to Toronto, ~~or New York, or~~

Others ~~arrive from~~

have arrived from Hong Kong, ~~or~~ New York,  
~~or Shenzhen~~  
~~or Sydney~~

Beijing, Sydney ... ~~or~~ ad so many other places.

For a moment ... ~~for many~~ indeed,

brief a multitude of moments, each ~~experience~~ an individual  
experience of ~~the~~ the ephemeral passing-by -- all these  
distant ~~the~~ places are ~~being~~ brought  
so near to one another ~~as these~~ by people making their  
~~as people make their way through the~~ way from  
one place to another

Geography is connector, and in the airport this

often means running to make the ~~see people with~~  
connecting flight. ~~Now there's a pilot program~~

People can

~~to allow customers to~~ decide ~~what~~ what kind  
of connector they want with people from distant  
places, ~~with whom they~~

that will be very near for a short while: ~~KL~~

~~is testing a system allowing~~

you can strike up a conversation at the airport  
bar. Or you can use KLM's ~~new~~ new online seat assignment app  
~~assignment~~, which allows

you to choose your flight neighbor on the  
basis of their Facebook profile. Using the app is like finding  
a big loophole in the first law of geography:



distasteful things can be brought near, for just a little while, if that's what you'd like.

If I chose something different. When I pass through ~~the airport~~ on airport, I usually look for ~~that airport~~ the highest achievement of modern urban civilization. This is how the newspaper was described by the sociologist Robert Park, ~~in the 1920s~~ ~~who inspired~~

in the  
1920s

"Chicago School"

who inspired generations of urban geographers.

~~who inspired~~ ~~the essence~~

(he also inspired generations of critics as well)

I always look for the newspaper that in my geographical imagination represents the newspaper. ~~from the~~ The Times needs only the definite article, like the city. Suddenly Hyde Park is near New York City ~~in~~ in the brief transaction where I pay for the newspaper (with a combination of U.S. and Canadian coins) in a YVR ~~airport~~ bookstore named after

~~the river~~ named after the Hudson River. ~~with~~ ~~a cup of coffee~~

Curling up with the paper and a cup of coffee, I find Waldo Tobler on page A1 of the Times.



## References

Gould, Peter. 1985. *The Geographer at Work*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

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Wolch, Jennifer. 2003. "Radical Openness as Method ~~in Urban Geography~~." *Urban Geography*

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