Behind the locality debate: deconstructing geography's dualisms

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Abstract. The debate about locality studies has provided a focus for wider concerns about method and the relationship of theory and empirical research in urban and regional studies. Discussion of these issues has been plagued by conceptual confusion. Where realist philosophy has been invoked in the debate it has frequently been misunderstood. The problems derive from unexamined and inconsistent usages of a series of dualisms or binary oppositions: viz, contextualising versus nomological (law-seeking) approaches, abstract and concrete, necessity and contingency, theory and empirics, and generality and specificity. When the various uses of these terms are examined it is found that the assumed contrasts either break down or involve more complex relationships than is commonly realised. The main purpose of the paper is to deconstruct the dualisms and expose some of the confusions they generate by reference to the locality debate. A subsidiary theme concerns the way in which different conceptions of generality, specificity, and interdependence form 'metaphysics' which tend, unnoticed, to dominate whole research programmes. As different metaphysics may be appropriate for different objects of study it is important to demonstrate their differences and respective limitations.

Introduction

The locality debate has provided a convenient focus for a number of overlapping controversies in urban and regional studies, concerning Marxism and post-Marxism, theory and empirical research, the implications of realist philosophy, and the nature and significance of space. In the process, research on localities has gained a significance quite out of proportion with its limited role in terms of research effort.[1] Important though the issues are, the level of debate has been disappointing. On the other hand, it has been useful in exposing the inadequacy of the very currency in which these wider issues have been discussed. Apparently innocuous words such as 'general' and 'context' have tripped up participants on both sides of the debate. Discussions have repeatedly been subverted by the widespread but unexamined use of suspect oppositions, such as 'general causal processes and local contingencies', or 'general theory and local empirical studies'. In such cases we see a pervasive tendency to align and conflate different dualisms, such as necessity-contingency with global-local, and to elide their differences, thereby generating a series of confusions.

That dualisms should figure so prominently is not surprising. Nor should it, in itself, be cause for alarm, for it is scarcely possible to think without them, and geography and urban and regional studies are no exception in this respect (Soja, 1985). In any discussion of the philosophy of the subject we are almost certain to encounter dualisms such as subject-object, art-science, theory-empirics, unique-general, idiographic-nomothetic, narrative-analysis, interpretive understanding-explanation, abstract-concrete, etc. The question is not whether they can be avoided but how they are defined and related.

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[1] It has also a sociological significance in terms of academic rivalries, but of course it is not done to pursue such matters.

Dualisms are powerful because they can polarise whole fields of concepts, especially when aligned in parallel so that they reinforce one another, as in figure 1.

idiographic – nomothetic
unique – general
independent – interdependent
empirical – theoretical
narrative – analysis
contextualising – nomological
applied research – pure research
contingent – necessary
concrete – abstract
local – global

Figure 1. Parallel dualisms implicit in geographical discourse or 'How *not* to think about method.'

It is when they are aligned that dualisms are at their most seductive and dangerous. What impresses us about such thinking may have more to do with its simplicity and symmetry than its ability to interpret the world. For example, it is tempting to argue that we need *powerful, economical, general theories that identify and explain the major, extensive, common, important, necessary things, rather than accumulations of descriptions of unimportant, particular, localised, contingent, unique details*. This is the gist of what some of the critics of locality research have suggested (for example, Harvey, 1987; Smith, 1987). Clearly, such an argument rests upon a set of parallel binary oppositions and their implied equivalences. And it is quite persuasive: who would not want robust, widely applicable knowledge? But the structure of dualisms is perhaps more persuasive than the argument itself, for even those who want to reject the argument often find themselves reasoning within the same framework, the same conceptual space. Yet, as we shall see, the framework is highly suspect: scarcely a single one of the presumed equivalences and contrasts in the above statement can survive scrutiny.

The primary aim of this paper is not to discuss locality research itself, still less to defend or attack it; nor do I provide much support for some of the ways in which realist philosophy has been associated with locality studies. Instead the object is to discuss the wider conceptual problems that have surfaced in the debate, in the hope of clearing the ground for future forays on theory and method in social science. In particular I shall attempt to deconstruct the dualisms which, both individually and in tandem, have structured thinking in this area and caused so much confusion. However, occasional reference will be made to locality issues as a source of examples.

I shall start by introducing some general properties of dualistic thinking and explain the nature of the 'deconstruction' about to be undertaken. Then in the main section of the paper, I shall examine and evaluate some of the main binary oppositions of figure 1 and their relationship to one another so as to expose some common errors. In each case their role in the localities debate is evaluated. One of these dualisms—the general and the specific—is of special significance, for its scrutiny can be used to reveal the existence of a set of alternative 'metaphysics' which dominate particular bodies of research, both in benign and in malign ways. These metaphysics are then discussed in the hope of increasing awareness of their effects. The paper concludes with some comments on the use and abuse of realist philosophy in the locality debate.

Dualistic thinking and 'deconstruction'

Many people have commented on the tendency of thought to be structured by binary oppositions. Perhaps our minds are so constructed that we are programmed to think in terms of dualisms. This could be reflected in the nature of language itself, insofar as meaning is constituted through the 'play of difference' among its terms, difference arguably being reducible to binary oppositions.[2] Often dualistic formulations are virtually unavoidable; for example, a discussion of social changes can hardly avoid setting up a contrast between old and new, and, although continuities need to be acknowledged, it is only too easy to allow the registered changes to harden into oppositions in which the new is the opposite of the old (see Sayer, 1989a). Yet, although binary oppositions such as new–old or North–South are the simplest, most minimal, way of registering differentiation, it would be surprising if everything in the world also conveniently happened to be two-sided and hence susceptible to analysis purely or largely in terms of dualistic conceptual systems. Equally, it would be surprising if nothing in the world were two-sided. So I am not attacking dualistic thinking in general—for example, as something which must always be 'dialectically transcended', for this seems arbitrary and dogmatic; rather, I am challenging particularly simplistic or overextended and yet unexamined kinds of dualistic thinking. Some individual dualisms may indeed present effective ways of differentiating the world, but when a wide range of developments or phenomena are held to be comprehensible in terms of a whole series of neatly aligned dualisms that straddle a single fault-line, or historical 'turning point', or 'spatial divide', the credibility of this form of rhetoric becomes strained. Therefore what is needed is not an a priori but an immanent critique, based on an analysis of the way in which dualisms operate in practice. It should aim to reveal which are consistent, which are ambiguous, which are incoherent, and, most importantly, which dualisms cannot be aligned in parallel without contradiction.

Some dualisms turn out to have a missing middle term, or to be continua rather than dichotomies. I shall argue that this is so in the case of the opposition of contextualising and nomological (law-seeking) views of social science. In some cases the basic terms of the dualism are simply incoherent or are too weak to bear the explanatory weight that is customarily put upon them (for example, the general and the particular). In others, as in the cases of centre and periphery, masculine and feminine, the terms not only *oppose* but *presuppose* one another in some respects. In other words, certain of their senses—and possibly their referents—may be internally rather than externally related. As we shall see, the theory–empirics dualism exemplifies this particularly well. There is no a priori reason why *all* binary oppositions should have this character, for the referents of some may be externally related; but where they are internally related they can justifiably be said to be 'dialectical'.

One more preliminary concerns 'deconstruction', an approach much in vogue in literary studies and much cited—though little used—in writing on social theory and geography. In some ways what follows is close to the deconstructionist procedure

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[2] I reject the poststructuralist view that meaning is determined *entirely* by the play of difference among lexical items; certainly the meaning of a term does not derive from a one-to-one relationship with a referent, but this does not entail that meaning has nothing to do with reference. Rather, reference influences meaning through what we might call the play of *practices*. Nor should the instability of the relationship between words and their referents be exaggerated: the success of most material (including communicative) practices presupposes relative stability and only limited change at any particular time.

as described by Johnson:

"The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the working of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities ... are shown to be based upon a repression of the differences *within* entities .... The 'deconstruction' of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values and differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of binary opposition" (B Johnson, 1980, pages x–xi).

However, for anyone familiar with this practice as it has developed in the study of literature, I should point out that I use the term 'deconstruction' only as an appealing and apt metaphor, for in many respects, my standpoint is at odds with the poststructuralist movement associated with the term and writers such as Jacques Derrida. I have no truck with deconstructionism's dissociation of language from practice and the 'extratextual world', and its concomitant rampant and reactionary idealism (Eagleton, 1983, pages 146–147; Giddens, 1987; Jefferson, 1986; Norris, 1985). Instead, the aim is to examine the multiple meanings of the terms of the dualisms as they are used in practice in order to reveal their limits, demonstrate the practical confusions which they promote, and then suggest clarifications. This is in keeping with Raymond Williams's analyses of the changing relationships between meanings and material practice in history, evident in his celebrated analysis of the country and the city. In other words, it aims to assess the realism of this form of rhetoric. For the sake of poststructuralists and postmodernists I should perhaps point out that such a project does not entail any assumption of having access to some absolute foundation of knowledge. But the lack of such a foundation does not mean that all knowledge is false, nonreferential, or equally fallible; an immanent critique such as this is still possible.

This may surprise those readers who associate an interest in forms of rhetoric with a rejection of realism (for example, Nelson et al, 1988). However, there is nothing incompatible about rhetoric and realism, for it is still possible and indeed necessary to question which form of rhetoric is most realistic, which one grasps the nature of the world most effectively. For an argument for this compatibility the reader is referred to Mäki (1989); suffice it to say that those rhetoricians who would reject realism are faced with the contradiction that their own efforts can only be understood as attempts to give a more realistic understanding of language or discourse than hitherto available (if not, we need not pay attention).

Deconstructing the dualisms
The target of the critique is the conceptual system represented by figure 1. The senses of many of the dualisms mingle and reinforce one another in the vertical dimension and through their horizontal and diagonal relations of opposition, as well as through sense relations with concepts not cited in the diagram. When presented formally like this, abstracted from particular uses, some of the oppositions and equivalences immediately look suspect, but when they are buried in debates about things like the role of theory in research on localities, their inadequacies are less exposed. Certain residues of particular clusters of these dualisms often remain even in the work of more philosophically vigilant authors, for it is hard *not* to think in terms of such structures of parallel dualisms.

Theory–empirics, 'general–specific', and 'abstract–concrete' are perhaps the key elements, but given their interconnectedness it is impossible to describe them in linear form without a certain amount of cross-referencing: each dualism tends to

be defined in terms of the others. My reason for starting with the contextualising–nomological dualism is that doing so does not presuppose too much of the analysis of all the other dualisms.

1 Contextualising–nomological

This is simultaneously a problem of methodology and of social ontology. Recently, in some circles, it has become popular to argue that the social sciences have a 'contextualising' character rather than a law-seeking, law-invoking, or 'nomological' one. According to this view, things are explained by reference to their contexts rather than nomologically by reference to universal laws or principles (for example, Geertz, 1973; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). It is obviously tempting to try to justify locality research in terms of the allegedly contextual nature of social processes. Though contextualisation is reminiscent of a concern with uniqueness, it is a much richer concept, suggesting a more explicit notion of determination and interdependence.[3] Where it comes from humanistic or interpretive quarters, this defence of contextualising accounts derives from a concern with meanings in society and their context-dependent or 'indexical' character. Where it comes from postmodernism, the rejection of law-seeking approaches stems from their association with 'metanarratives' or overarching philosophical systems which apparently 'grounded' knowledge. Postmodernism accuses these metanarratives of making untenable claims to absolute foundations; in reaction it celebrates relativism and 'local knowledges'.

Nomological approaches were of course sought by the advocates of the nomothetic geography of the spatial analysis school, who refused to acknowledge that attempts to subsume unique historical events under general laws only produced absurdities (Outhwaite, 1987, pages 8–9).[4]

I wish to argue that in *some* respects, contextualising and nomological explanations are two ends of a *continuum* rather than a dichotomy, and that their suitability does indeed depend on what it is we are studying. The basic argument might be put most simply thus: because the behaviour of law-governed phenomena in nature is always dependent on certain conditions (for example, the temperature at which water boils is dependent on pressure), it is questionable whether it is possible to distinguish sharply between dependence on conditions and dependence on context. I would argue that it is not possible and that the only difference is one of the complexity and uniqueness of conditions.

Nomological approaches are most successful in relation to objects which are highly context-*in*dependent, whose nature and behaviour is the same whatever the context. When we say something is more context-dependent than something else, we mean that the range of conditions on which it depends is larger and more complex, and less likely to be replicated exactly in different times and places. Chemical reactions are often dependent on relatively simple contexts. The behaviour of such objects is related in a stable, predictable fashion to a small, limited number of conditions, but apart from these, they are context-independent. Although objects such as molecules obviously have had particular time–space distributions, the fact that they have remained essentially the same, or have changed in fixed ways, and that they are not concept-dependent, means that they have no histories or geographies.

[3] Contrary to Warde's claim (1989), realism asserts rather than excludes the causal efficacy of context: hence the term 'causal context' and the emphasis on studying phenomena in the contexts which are causally relevant to them (Sayer, 1984, pages 222, 223, and 228).

[4] They could do this either by asserting that the world is entirely orderly such that law-seeking methods are appropriate everywhere, for example, "That there is more order in the world than appears at first sight is not discovered *till the order is looked for*" Sigwart, quoted in Haggett and Chorley (1966, page 20), or by saying that law-likeness has to be created in our systems of thought, come what may.

At the other end of the spectrum we have phenomena such as political ideologies which are arguably highly context-dependent. I say arguably because typically even phenomena like political ideologies are not entirely dissimilar across different contexts, nor do the contexts necessarily differ that much. Whereas theorists in sociology and political science have tended to ignore their distinctive, constitutive histories and geographies, geographers—anxious to find some areal differentiation—sometimes fall into the opposite trap of underestimating continuities across space and time.[5]

In the middle of the continuum lie cases like the laws referring to objects such as animal behaviour, which are limited in spatial and temporal range and subject to evolutionary change. In the social sciences, there are a few limited transhistorical claims that can be made, for example about the necessity of material production and language to social life, but then we enter the domain of the historically and geographically specific. Some of the space–time fields within which certain social structures exist are large, such as that of the capitalist mode of production, and hence some processes, like capital accumulation may be relatively context-independent, or be capable of producing their own preconditions or contexts of reproduction within certain bounds. Even these, though, have histories and geographies. But many interesting social structures lie somewhere between the cases of capital accumulation and political culture, and involve social structures in the process of becoming or transformation or taking innumerable forms, the differences between these being more than cosmetic. The institution of marriage is a good example of this, being very common in a wide variety of societies, yet varying considerably over time and space according to context.

'Geological' or layer metaphors are obviously tempting here for describing concrete situations—more context-independent structures such as those of capital being 'overlain' by more context-dependent ones such as company and employment legislation, but the metaphors are strained by the recognition of the extent to which the different layers are implicated in each other's reproduction (Storper, 1987; Warde, 1985).[6] The point to be made here is that for social science and human geography it is not a matter of choosing between contextualising or law-invoking explanations, but of deciding *how far, or at what depth* (if we are allowed the geological metaphor again), *are our particular objects of interest influenced by their context?* (Sayer, 1989b). The answers will always depend upon the kind of object we are dealing with: a priori solutions cannot be given to this question. It will be shown later than recognising this has important implications for understanding the relationship of theory and empirical research.

In drawing attention to this continuum between contextualising and nomological approaches I am abstracting from the qualititative difference which sharply distinguishes the objects of the social from those of the natural sciences, namely, the intrinsically meaningful or concept-dependent character of social phenomena.[7] For example, the nature of a place—as distinct from a space—is dependent not only on its particular material context, but upon the meanings attached to it by social actors. Hence it is not just that the relationships between action and context are

[5] I would suggest that this is the case with Pred's (1989) discussion of the local character of language.

[6] I think the layer metaphors are dispensable: when we say that something operates at a 'deeper' level all we mean is that it makes more difference to other objects than something else. Thus our brains make more difference than our hair colour to our behaviour.

[7] From the point of view of realist ontology it should be noted that there are stratifications across this continuum, with higher strata being constituted from lower strata, yet having powers emergent from them, as in the relations of the objects of biology to those of chemistry and physics. (See Bhaskar, 1975; 1979.)

complex, but that actors actively interpret, and hence can change, both the relationships and themselves. Or to put it another way, not only are actions dependent on a wide variety of conditions, but the nature of the dependence can vary over space and time as actors change their interpretations (compare Giddens, 1987, page 100). This characteristic eludes the closed-system thinking of behavioural research in the traditions of regional science and neoclassical economics. So humanistic geography's rejection of nomological approaches is based upon more than the objection of context-dependence; it concerns meaning in society. As a difference of kind rather than degree, it cannot be understood in terms of our continuum. Thus, for humanistic geographers and social scientists, the dichotomous (rather than continuous) opposition of contextualising and nomological approaches stands, but as a distinction about meaning and its relationship to objects, rather than as a distinction about simple versus complex causal determination, or contextualisation versus nomological explanation per se.

It therefore remains possible to acknowledge the continuum as regards context dependence and independence, while recognising that the *kind* of contextualisation required for social phenomena will differ from that concerning nonsocial phenomena, because only the first involves interpretative understanding of the object. (To break the continuum because of this qualitative change would make it incompatible with the concept of mind as an emergent power of the body and create an implausible gulf between mind and body.) As we shall see, this situation, in which a dualism appears tenable in some respects but not in others, is quite typical.

Finally, and contrary to common assumption, we should note that the contextualising–nomological continuum is not necessarily related to *scale*. This has been particularly prevalent in thinking about localities. As soon as one says that a certain kind of behaviour depends on context it is assumed that this can only mean a local context; that is it implies the following alignment of dualisms

> global – local
> | |
> nomological – contextual
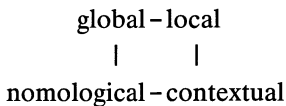
However, the context may be simultaneously local, national, and global. Thus in South Wales, the reaction of various electronics firms to intensifying competition depended not only on the local context but on the national context (for example, the United Kingdom's 'open door' policy towards inward investment), and on the international context in terms of the international division of labour and the geography of major markets (Morgan and Sayer, 1988). It follows from this that contextualising approaches cannot be tarred with the brush of parochialism—at least not on a priori grounds—as some critics imply, though some studies may indeed be guilty of ignoring supralocal contexts.

2 Abstract–concrete
One of the main preoccupations in recent methodological debate in human geography and social science has been 'reductionism'—the practice of underestimating the complexity of determination and thereby underestimating the variety of possible outcomes. In industrial geography, for example, reading off industrial decentralisation from the logic of capital or from product-cycle theory, as if other, mediating influences were absent or trivial, could be construed as reductionism (Lipietz, 1986; Sayer, 1985b; Storper, 1985). Arguably, the desire to counteract this reductionism was one of the forces behind the 'empirical turn' in radical social science, including locality research. Crucial to resolutions of this problem has been the abstract–concrete distinction. This appears straightforward enough in everyday language, though

more difficult in the specialised uses found in Marx. In fact it has three quite different senses, which are often confused with one another. Further confusion is added by conceptual interference from the distinction between theory and empirics. These senses are:

2.1 The abstract–concrete dualism distinguishes knowledge of nonmaterial objects from knowledge of material objects. In itself this first sense is quite coherent, provided it is not confused with the other two.

2.2 The abstract–concrete dualism sometimes functions partly as a synonym for the distinction between the realms of thought and reality, respectively. I say partly because users are rarely consistent about this. If we were to be consistent, then *all* our ideas would have to be considered abstract, even those about unambiguously material objects. But typically within this usage, it is also assumed that some kinds of knowledge—in whose ability to refer to the real we have great confidence—are 'more concrete'. This implies a confusion between ideas about reality and reality itself, that is, an 'epistemic fallacy' (Bhaskar, 1975). Concrete concepts are no less different and distinct from their referents than are abstract ones. If we are not consistent, we obfuscate the central problem of epistemology, secreting by default an implicit assumption of the discredited division between theory and theory-neutral observation. As we shall see, this is where most damage is done by interference from inadequate versions of the theory–empirics dualism which also conflate empirical statements with their referents. Thus the following couple of parallel dualisms is incoherent:

abstract–concrete

    | |

thought–reality

and needs (provisionally) to be replaced by:

realm of knowledge– realm of material objects

  abstract concepts–abstract objects

  concrete concepts–concrete objects

2.3 If, as the diagram suggests, abstract and concrete are dissociated from any parallel with the dualism of thought and reality, we are left with a third sense of abstract and concrete, one used at times, though not universally, by Marx. In this case it functions as a distinction between the *one-sided* and the *many-sided*. Clearly, we are dealing here with a continuum rather than a dichotomy, which was the case in the first two senses. The distinction can refer either to concepts or their referents, so there can be abstract (aspects of) objects and the concepts which refer to them, and concrete concepts, referring to many-sided or concrete objects. Provided we do not confuse the concepts and their referents, as did the second definition, we need not run into the epistemological problems described above. Thus we can use the terms abstract and concrete in this third sense while respecting the difference between knowledge and the real world. It is this sense which realist philosophy finds most valuable (Sayer, 1984).[8]

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[8] This is reflected in Marx's famous definition, "The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects" (Marx, 1973, page 101). That Marx also seems to have used the abstract–concrete distinction in the other senses is evident in his fulminations against authors who mistake their conceptual abstractions for the material world. This is why 'abstraction' is sometimes used as a term of abuse, and at others as one which he is happy to apply to his own concepts.

However, once again the picture is more complex because of the presence of the 'missing term' in the relationship between thought and reality—practice, and this is why our modified diagram was described as only provisional. Sometimes abstract objects, or 'pure cases', of simple objects, may exist spontaneously or be isolated out through human practice. Hence the whole point of experiments in natural science is *physically* to abstract objects of interest, though of course abstract concepts are needed to inform and interpret this practice. In material practice or labour we routinely physically separate out or abstract objects which are of use to us from their concrete contexts. To be sure, we need abstract *concepts* to refer to these, but they refer to material rather than conceptual objects.[9]

It has again been common to associate abstract and concrete with *scale*; for example, the view that abstract theory deals with broad, general processes which go beyond individuals and particular places, whereas concrete studies deal with the particular, with localities, individuals, etc; that is,

abstract – concrete
    | |
  global – local

But, as with the association of 'context' with scale, this is easily disposed of. Concrete objects can be big (like a multinational firm) or small (like a corner shop). Some abstractions refer to aspects of things which are small and restricted, like electrons, or big, like the social division of labour. And microeconomics uses abstraction as much as macroeconomics. When presented in this way, it might seem obvious that these dualisms are not equivalent, yet assumptions that they can be so aligned have been common. As we shall see later, these dubious associations with the scale and scope of knowledge have much to do with unexamined concepts of generality.

3 Necessary – contingent

This distinction has gained a strong association with realism—too strong probably, for in some commentaries realist philosophy is virtually reduced to it. It has also been widely misused, by advocates as well as by opponents of realism (Smith, 1987; Warde, 1989). Let me list some points of clarification as briefly as possible:

1. The kind of necessity in question is not logical necessity but natural necessity. It concerns not the relation between knowledge and the world or between statements but between things.

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[9] To make matters more difficult, when social objects do get abstracted 'objectively', they are sometimes referred to either as 'concrete abstractions' or 'real abstractions' (for example, Storper, 1987). This combines the third sense of 'abstract' with the second sense of 'concrete'. Not surprisingly, given the widespread lack of awareness of the difference between these different usages, such terms commonly create confusion and puzzlement. If we are aware of the different senses, and the epistemological implications of each, the terms need not be problematic, but it would be more prudent to find alternative terms to deal with abstraction as a material process. In his provocatively entitled book, *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987), Derek Sayer has presented an interesting argument to the effect that these kinds of material processes of abstraction, in which social forms take on a life of their own, separating themselves from their context of origin, are chronically underestimated in modern marxist thought and yet are at the centre of what Marx's critique of capitalist society is about: "Marx persistently relates the abstractions of social phenomena from their historic integument—he speaks of the abstraction of the state, abstract labour, the abstract individual, and so on, in ways that are too consistent and too frequent to be coincidental—to the particular social conditions of capitalist production and the world of fetishized appearances they sustain. Reification for him is a real social process" (page 130).

2. Contingent means 'neither necessary nor impossible'. This meaning is not to be confused with the more familiar and quite different sense of 'dependent', as in 'x was contingent upon y'.

3. It is contingent whether we recognise necessity. Claims about necessity are fallible and do not imply any kind of epistemological foundationalism.

4. There is little sense in saying that something is contingent if it is not also clear what is contingently related to what, in other words, if it is not clear what *relation* is contingent; for example 'local contingencies'—a phrase widely used in the locality literature—is at best ambiguous, at worst meaningless. If what is meant is that the relation between, say, the existence of a traditional local industry and a firm newly entering the area from outside is contingent, then there need be no problem. Hence to describe a relation as necessary (internal) or contingent (external) is to say something about the conditions of existence of the relata; in the first case that the very existence of the relata is interdependent, in the second case that it is not. In this respect the equivalent internal–external distinction causes less confusion because one cannot help but refer them to relations.

5. Contingent, therefore, does not mean 'uncaused' or undetermined. For the relata of a contingent (as well as a necessary) relation must each have causes and preconditions of existence, only these causes and preconditions do not include each other; the old industry and the new industry were not caused by, and do not presuppose, one another, but they were nevertheless determined by other processes. To talk of 'local (or any other) contingencies' is not therefore [pace Harvey (1987), Smith (1987), Warde (1989), and various others] to talk of a domain of accident, beyond the scope of explanation and theory (Sayer, 1984, page 99). (See section 4.)

6. Things which are contingently related in terms of their origins and conditions of existence may nevertheless come to influence one another, to interact causally (Sayer, 1984, page 82). 'Contingently related' need not mean 'having no mutual impact'. All it means is that the relata can exist independently of one another.

7. Great care is needed in defining the relata, particularly with respect to the level of abstraction of the analysis and the specific properties of the objects concerned. Thus, if we analyse the relationship of patriarchy and capitalism at the level of actual firms, the particular composition of their workforces and the relationships between men and women, we would note the extent to which there has been a mutual accommodation and hence an interdependence between the form of capital and the form of patriarchy. Nevertheless, at a more abstract level where we are concerned with the minimal conditions required for the existence of capital or patriarchy as such, the relation could be shown to be contingent, for capital accumulation could take place without patriarchy.

8. When certain objects come into a contingent relation, whether intentionally or unintentionally, certain effects may follow necessarily from their causal powers and relative configuration. This is the standard case in the natural world. In the social world contingent relations may be engineered and/or exploited to take advantage of the possibilities of the situation. Thus, the continued existence of a rice-growing peasantry in Japan is contingently related to the country's electronics industry; nevertheless, the coincidence is exploited by some electronics firms in their search for cheap labour, and this enables them to do different things than would otherwise be possible. This close combination of contingency and necessity is typical but can cause confusion if not dealt with carefully. Another example: internal or necessary social relations can often take different forms. Thus, although the relation between husband and wife is internal or necessary, in the sense defined above, it is contingent whether the individuals forming that relationship are of the same or different race.

9. As with other dualisms *contingency and necessity need to be disassociated from scale differences*. The phrase 'local contingent factors' seems to have become so well worn in locality research that 'local' and 'contingent' have become virtual synonyms in some quarters. Though the phrase may be perfectly reasonable in some contexts, it in no way entails that the local is not also a realm of necessity or that by contrast necessity is the preserve of 'general' (that is, supralocal) processes or that contingency is absent at these larger scales. That anyone should fall for such nonsequiturs is indicative of the low level of debate.

I have picked out these points because they have been so frequently overlooked or misinterpreted in the geographical literature, and especially the localities debate. However, it was never my intention to force this difficult formalism of necessity and contingency on researchers as if it were the sine qua non of a realist approach. As I wrote in *Method in Social Science* (1984) it is a *formal reconstruction* of *some* of the reasoning patterns which can usefully be deployed in social science. (Naturally there are many other good ways of reasoning, many of which realism explicates; hence the absurdity of supposing that this is all there is to realism.) The same conclusions can be reached in practice—and with less trouble, provided point 7 is borne in mind—by asking simple existential questions like: Given these objects, could one exist without the other? What does the existence of x presuppose? What is it *about* x that makes it do y?. Characteristically they also oblige us to define our key objects more carefully.

Consider a 'locality example': suppose we want to explain why the level of industrial disputes is above average in a certain locality. Pretty soon we would have to confront the question of whether 'the locality' was relevant at all and what exactly we meant by that term, whether it was merely a surrogate for more relevant constituent objects. Suppose that the frequency of disputes were highest in large plants and the locality in question had an exceptional number of them. The above questions would not allow us to rest with such an 'explanation' for they would oblige us to identify what, if anything, it was about large plants, that made them dispute-prone (for example, size per se or the particular way, contingently related to size, in which they are organised, or who the particular people are who work in them, etc). At first sight these may seem rather obvious points, but it is rare to see such questions pursued far. The resolution of explanatory and theoretical problems in social science invariably depends heavily on the persistence and the care with which we pursue these questions.[10]

4 Theory–empirics

We expect a great deal of the term 'theory', and few researchers dare take it lightly. There is always an air of importance about debates on the current condition of theory in the subject, and if anyone says our work is 'atheoretical' or 'empiricist', it hurts. Accusations have been made to the effect that the CURS (Changing Urban and Regional System) initiative represents an abandonment of theory, and various comments have been made on the relationship between theory and empirical research, sometimes involving metaphors of 'gulfs' and 'knife-edges' (for example, Smith, 1987).

The brevity of such comments is typical—most researchers take the meaning of these categories for granted and never bother to consider their different senses.[11]

[10] The work of Massey and Meegan stands out in its persistence with these kinds of questions (for example, 1982). In similar vein but at a second-order or metatheoretical level, some authors (for example, Duncan, 1986; Duncan and Savage, 1989; Urry, 1987) have also attempted the difficult task of formalising the ontology of social space, including distinguishing different senses of 'locality effects'.)

[11] As Massey notes in her foreward to *New Models in Geography* (Peet and Thrift, 1989), different but unexamined usages of 'theory' continue to coexist in urban and regional studies.

If pressed, most people can offer a definition, but even where the definitions come from researchers antagonistic to positivism, they have an uncanny habit of echoing long-discredited positivist or logical empiricist definitions of theory. Such definitions are usually of the narrow, prescriptive type which fail to cover the range of senses of the term, even of those used in their own discourse. In practice, however, we find not only that it is stretched to cover several different senses, but that some of these senses directly or indirectly contradict one another.

However before launching into an explication of these senses, it should be said that this may be taking a sledgehammer to a nut, for all that may be involved is a dogmatic reduction of 'theory' to the theory particular to Marx, so that anyone who strays outside the theoretical tent of orthodox Marxism (into *other* theories) is liable to be considered lost in an empiricist blizzard (Archer, 1987; Harvey, 1987; Sayer, 1987).

But in case that is unfair, let me proceed: 'theory', in each of its variants, gains much of its sense from being counterposed to empirical research (hereafter 'empirics'), yet it turns out that these apparent opposites also presuppose one another. It is this quality which has caused most difficulties. When we examine the complimentary senses of 'theory' set up by unexamined views of empirics, we find that they implicitly situate theory and empirics on respective sides of an opposition between knowledge and reality, in much the same way as was found with some uses of abstract and concrete:

theory – empirics
    | |
thought – reality

Such an alignment of parallel dualisms incorporates two closely related and mutually reinforcing problems:

(1) The first involves a conflation of empirical or observation statements with the things to which they refer, as in the elision of the distinctions between facts as things existing independently of our knowledge of them and factual statements, contingently made about those things. This is paralleled by a confusion, encapsulated in the incoherent concept of an 'empirical world', which conflates the epistemological category of the empirical with the ontological category of the real (Bhaskar, 1975). The empirical is not synonymous with the real, first because 'empirical' is a category of experience, such that the real can only be represented under some description, within some language. Second, to assume that the domain or referents of experience exhaust reality would imply that reality just happened to be coextensive with the range of our senses and that knowledge of the world was complete, such that there could be nothing new to discover. Thus apparently innocent terms such as 'empirical events' (often used by antiempiricists as well as empiricists) can be misleading, generating an illicit identification of the empirical with the real which tends, through the usual contrast with theory, to make the latter seem (more) divorced from reality, and purely hypothetical or heuristic. Moreover, as is clear in Marxism, this runs counter to the practice of science, where theories quite clearly are considered to make reference to real objects, some of which are unobservable (for example, value, gravity).

(2) The second major problem is the supposition that the empirical is theory free or theory neutral, and hence that a theory-neutral observation language is possible. [Even to suppose, as Archer (1987) and Smith (1987) appear to do, that empirical research ever could be atheoretical in the sense of theory-neutral is to condone the central fallacy of empiricism.] This is related to the first problem insofar as falsely uniting or identifying the empirical with the real 'pulls' empirics away, as it were, from its association with theory, leaving theory adrift as 'hypothesis'

on the other side of the knowledge–reality dichotomy. (This is a very typical kind of behaviour of the 'play of difference' in language: bringing one pair of concepts closer together has the effect of stretching an adjacent pair further apart.) The objection that all observation, even the simplest, is theory-laden has been well-established in philosophy for the last twenty years and does not need further rehearsal, save to say that it does not entail that what we are able to observe is entirely determined by theory such that theory is observation-neutral.[12] Equally, although theories often refer to unobservables (or—not the same thing—to hypothetical objects), it does not mean that this is their only role so that the realm of the observable becomes theory-free.

The second (2), though rarely the first (1), of these problems is well known in all but a few backwaters of empiricism in social science. Yet such is the lack of examination of the concept of theory that most academics continue to use it in ways which perpetuate rather than avoid these problems.

Although the above points deal with these empiricist and positivist residues, three further different senses remain.

4.1 As is implied by the concept of 'theory-ladenness', theories provide *an examined conceptualisation* of their objects. If we take the theory-ladenness argument seriously, then *there cannot be a simple opposition between theory and empirics*, even where researchers imagine there to be one (Sayer, 1984). This does not mean to say that theorising and doing empirical research are identical activities: undermining a simple dichotomy need not entail replacing it with an identity. And just because empirical research is always theory-laden, it does not mean that the answers to all questions lie 'within theory' so that we can dispense with empirical research, or that when we do empirical research we abandon theory (pace Archer, 1987). Moreover, if it cuts any ice, Marx was a frequent critic of preemptive uses of theory (D Sayer, 1987, page 130). There is therefore no inconsistency in acknowledging theory-ladenness and saying that something is an 'empirical question' (for example, 'what kind of agriculture is practised in Kent?'); that is, one whose answer is given sense and guided by theory but not provided by it. However there is a difficulty in acknowledging the universality of theory-ladenness and wanting to continue to describe some knowledge as 'atheoretical'—unless, that is, we reserve the latter for knowledge which is unaware of its conceptualisations.

Now at this point, readers may feel some unease about this explication of theory and empirics, perhaps because sense 4.1 gives theory a far broader and less exclusive role than is normal so that it informs lay as well as academic or scientific knowledge. But how else can we consistently acknowledge that *all* observation is theory-laden?

4.2 However, this broad sense provides a basis for a more restricted sense to do with the role of theory in explanation. This is because to have a concept of an object is usually to know something about its structure and/or powers. On a realist view, theory explains by making claims about necessity in the world, typically codifying the conditions of existence of particular objects and identifying their structure, powers, and liabilities (Sayer, 1984). But theory cannot be expected to anticipate the *form* of relationships which are contingent (that is, neither necessary nor impossible)—*how could any theory do so?*. It might tell us what the necessary conditions of existence of, say, nation-states are, for example, including their control over territory (Mann, 1986), but not the specific geographical form of nation-states. Nevertheless, even in dealing with contingent relations, theory remains

[12] Ian Hacking has usefully questioned this consensus on the grounds that it implies a peculiarly broad concept of theory, but it should be noted that he fully accepts that observation statements are conceptually mediated (Hacking, 1983).

indispensable for identifying the objects involved, however they happen to be configured (that is, sense 4.1), and for informing explanations of their origins (Sayer, 1984).

The dialectical relationship between theory and empirics is further evident in the origin of new theories. These usually concern newly discovered or hypothesised forms of necessity in the world. Empirical research (theoretically informed of course) is seldom *purely* the documenting of the contingent (contrary to a common misunderstanding of realism). It also permits the checking and refinement of knowledge about necessity in the world and can be the source of new discoveries of necessity or internal relations. For example, empirical research on the Eastern Bloc has enabled the identification of certain necessary properties of complex, centrally planned economies, which tend to produce chronic shortages (Kornai, 1986). Empirical research—including one would hope, locality research—is therefore not only theoretically informed but theoretically informative. In recognising this interdependency of theory and empirics, and in accepting the role of theoretical reflection, it is therefore possible to say that knowledge of social structures, etc, is empirically derived without implying support for the empiricist doctrine that knowledge is grounded in theory-neutral or conceptually unmediated experience (Sayer, 1989b).

Two further, simpler senses of theory can be identified.

4.3 One rests on the contrast between unfamiliar and esoteric (theoretical) concepts and everyday (empirical) ones. But as historians of science remind us, today's familiar 'empirical' terms are often just yesterday's esoteric 'theoretical' terms (compare Hesse, 1980). Moreover, familiar, everyday explanations and concepts may identify necessity (sense 4.2) no less than esoteric ones. Simple and naive though these associations seem, they are remarkably common, even amongst philosophers. They gain much of their force from a common alignment with the opposition between intellectual or academic knowledge and lay and commonsense knowledge. However to use them as the basis of a distinction between theory and nontheory simply reposes the problematic notion of theory-neutral knowledge.

4.4 Last, ideas about theory are strongly associated with notions of generality, the sense of the theory–empirics dualism often being overdetermined by the opposition of general/universal versus particular/unique/specific. But criticism of this will have to be postponed until we have taken a closer look at 'generality'.

Once again, then, the assumed parallels between dualisms do not stand up to examination. Each dualism turns out to have several different senses, some of which are contradictory. In fact, only senses 4.1 and 4.2 manage both to be individually and mutually consistent and to avoid our initial pair of problems regarding the nonidentity of the empirical and the real and the universality of theory-ladenness. In the light of this it is hardly surprising that discussions of the role of theory and empirics are often highly confused.

We can witness some of the confusion in the common search for a 'middle ground' between theory and empirics, evident again in the localities debate (for example, Smith, 1987). If interpreted strictly, this involves a category mistake, because theory and empirics presuppose and mediate one another: there is no gap between them. What Smith is probably looking for is a middle way or bridge between certain academic, esoteric categories such as 'value' or 'capital accumulation' which refer to objects claimed to be real but unobservable, and more observable, familiar ones, such as price or industrial location. Yet even the latter are theory-laden categories, so it is not a question of a bridge between something theoretical and something somehow not theoretical. What researchers really want when they speak of the search for a middle ground between theory and empirics is a bridge between different theories or between different sets of empirical questions. For example, whatever forms the bridge between value and price will be no less, and no more, 'theoretical' than that which it joins.

We can now draw out some important implications by connecting these conclusions to those regarding the contextual–nomological continuum.

If theorising in sense 4.2 concerns the structure, necessary conditions, and powers of objects (though not what they contingently do), its role is likely to differ between the human and physical sciences. Where structures are largely context-independent, once their properties have been understood, then their theories should not need continual revision as they are applied to different cases. Where structures are undergoing transformation, as all social structures are (though at varying speeds), concrete and abstract research need to be in far closer dialogue than is ever necessary for their natural science equivalents of pure and applied research. Engineers are not likely to find the laws of physics changing in their attempts to apply them and they therefore do not need to be theoretical physicists. But students of, say, regional geography, are quite likely to be faced with change in social structures themselves and are obliged to do some social theorising about their changing nature and powers. Conversely students of social theory (though perhaps not metatheory à la Giddens) cannot get far beyond high-level abstractions like 'power' and 'agency' without doing some historical and geographical work (Bhaskar, 1986).

Another implication is that, whereas 'storytelling' is often seen (pejoratively) as alien to natural science and exclusive to the humanities, we should expect theorising and storytelling to be close cousins in social science. Where social structures undergo rapid transformation and have varying geographies, explaining their changing properties and geography involves a mixture of storytelling and theorising.[13]

5 Generality–specificity

Generality is one of the most central elements in the conceptual network. Yet, as is only apt, it also has an exceptionally wide and loose range of senses. These conceal a complex of ambiguities which subvert the assumed associations and contrasts within the system of dualisms. They have also played a big role in subverting the localities debate, particularly through the couple 'general processes and local specificities'. These ambiguities or different usages have important implications for philosophy and methodology, especially through the common association of generality and generalisation with theory, and in opposition to concerns with particularity or specificity.

Close synonyms of general, generality, generalisation, and generic include usual, common, typical, representative, universal, standard, whole, inclusive, comprehensive, broad, indiscriminate, loose, and inexact. These can be broken down into three fairly distinct usages, each of which, in significantly different ways, implicitly defines the general through its relationship to the individual, specific, particular or unique. Briefly, these are:

$generality_1$ the general (or generic) as the usual, main, typical, or representative situation;

$generality_2$ the general as the situation as a whole—comprehensive, broad, inclusive, as distinct from local, specific, or particular parts (as in general and partial equilibrium).

[A further sense, less relevant to this discussion uses general to mean vague, inexact or indiscriminate (as in 'a general dislike of suburban life').] Let us look at these 'generalities' more fully:

Generality$_1$ involves widely replicated instances of identical (or similar) events or phenomena, often in the form of regularities, that is, as the opposite of the singular or unique. Although the general here refers to a group, it can also be illustrated

by reference to a particular, typical, or representative case, sometimes called the general case. This resonates with the atomistic ontology of a positivist conception of science, that is a view of the world as consisting in discrete atomistic events or objects. Part–whole relations are taken to be external relations between individuals and the taxonomic groups of which they are a part, the whole consequently being assumed to be structureless and no more than the sum of its parts. (A taxonomic group is one whose members share common characteristics, formal similarities, but need not interact with one another.) Although positivism cannot fully acknowledge it, in social science the similarities and regularities assumed in this kind of generality are usually only approximate, because of the absence of closed systems, and because the phenomena have geographies and histories (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 1984), though much depends upon how concretely or abstractly (in sense 2.3) the objects in question are specified.

Generality$_2$ concerns something which is simply large in relation to whatever we are looking at, and yet perhaps internally related to it in various ways. Thus, in relation to a person, an institution or a city, the state or capitalism are often seen as 'general'; here 'general' gains its sense from its opposition to 'local' or 'restricted', and as the whole in relation to the parts, be they similar or dissimilar. Yet precisely because part–whole relations can be internal, this opposition is of objects which, at least in some ways, also presuppose one another. The kind of group to which generality$_2$ refers is therefore not taxonomic, but causal or functional (that is, based on interdependencies between individuals) (see Sayer, 1984, chapter 9). Generality$_2$ involves cases where differentiation, particularity, and perhaps uniqueness arise through the interdependencies between objects or places.

To some extent the participants in the debate in geography and social science about generality, uniqueness, and differentiation have talked past one another by using these different concepts of generality. Thus, when we ask whether certain research findings from a particular case are 'generalisable' we could answer in terms of generality$_1$, that is according to whether identical or similar findings are common elsewhere. In the case of research on localities the answer might often be negative. Yet, even if we thought that nothing was generalisable in this sense, it would not follow that the implications of the study were merely parochial and of no relevance for wider society, for they might be generalisable in terms of generality$_2$; that is, the particular or the unique might be internally related to some aspects of the whole or other parts of the system. In this second sense it is possible to argue that (some aspects of) the whole are 'contained' in the part and even that the part imprints onto or structures the rest of the whole. For this reason, locality studies need not be solely of parochial interest.

6 Generality, specificity, and theory

Now the main kinds of generality have been outlined we can return to the issue of their connection to theory. The power of theory is often supposed to derive from its 'generality'. This might be construed as a positivist residue in that it associates explanation with the identification of regularity (generality$_1$) rather than necessity, but often even antipositivists share this association (compare Cochrane, 1988). However, unique objects have to be conceptualised and explained no less than widely repeated ones and they can therefore hardly be beyond the scope of theory. Therefore restricting theory to the formalisation and explanation of widely replicated (that is, general$_1$) phenomena reinvites the discredited notion of theory-neutral observation through the back door. And, as we noted earlier in discussing nomological views of explanation, unique social events—like the dismantling of the Berlin wall—cannot be explained by invoking general laws of stable, regular behaviour without absurdity.

In a realist conception (4.1 and 4.2) theory concerns necessity rather than generality$_1$, making claims of the form 'given that this system has structure x, it necessarily has certain causal powers y' (for example, given the decentralised structure of an industrial district it can respond to change more flexibly than can large vertically integrated firms') or 'this kind of object x presupposes (as a necessary condition), y' (for example, profit, rent, and interest presuppose that labour produces more than it consumes'). *Whether the necessity identified gives rise to a regularity, and hence to 'generality$_1$', depends upon the contingent matter of how widely replicated the objects concerned are.* Only where the objects are widely replicated will we find that which *generates* phenomena gives rise to any *generality$_1$*.[14]

The latter has to be shown rather than merely assumed, however; we cannot automatically assume that those who emphasise differentiation and specificity rather than generality$_1$ in their work have failed to grasp the general situation in this first sense of widely replicated (and presumably, fairly context-independent) phenomena. We have to provide some evidence that such generalities$_1$ exist: possibly there might not be any (compare Harvey and Scott, 1989). In other words, epistemological and methodological injunctions about studying generalities ought to be mindful of ontological limits.

A further consequence of the association of theory with generality$_1$ is that it encourages a converse and complimentary association between the empirical and the particular:

theory – empirics
   | |
general – particular

Thus, for example, Watts (1988) has expressed concern about the emphasis upon the 'empirical and the particular' in recent geography. Although this is an understandable concern—given the dangers of parochialism and empty-headed fact-gathering—the pairing of 'empirical' and 'particular' should be treated with care for clearly general phenomena (in either sense of general) can be empirical too, that is observable. *The general is no less the province of empirics than is the local.* Equally, large, even global phenomena, can be particular and specific (for example, IBM). *Locality studies therefore have no monopoly on particularity and specificity.*

Possibly, what is happening also here is that some critics are operating with an implicitly positivist alignment of a distinction between generality and specificity with that between explanation and description, viz.:

general – specific
   | |
explanation – description

Notwithstanding the fuzziness of the distinction between explanation and description, this again implies the problematic notion that one cannot explain anything unless it can be reduced to generality$_1$, so that specific and unique phenomena are put beyond the reach of theory and explanation.

7 'General processes and local contingencies?'
One of the most common motifs of the literature on locality studies has been the view that they deal with 'general processes and local contingencies' or the way in which the effects of general causes or processes are modified by local contingencies.

[14] An intriguing question not pursued here concerns the common etymology of 'generate' and 'general'.

Once again, realist philosophy has been invoked to defend such a position, though with little justification. Implicit in this position is the following alignment of dualisms:

> general – local
> | |
> cause/necessity – condition/contingency

We have already dealt with one of the problems: the false association of contingency and necessity with small and large scale, respectively. But the error also derives from a one-sided and arbitrarily restrictive interpretation of the realist model of causation. According to this model, objects have inherent causal powers, but whether they are activated and with what effects depends on conditions. It is tempting in geography to think of the case of a multinational firm, accumulating capital, and producing effects which vary according to the particular characteristics of the localities in which it operates. Here it seems that capital accumulation is the 'general cause' and the local characteristics 'local contingencies'. The impression quickly follows that things happen *to* localities, and that localities are merely reactive and that nothing or nothing of importance is initiated by them. This may be reinforced first by misconstruing 'conditions' as inert rather than simply as objects other than the one under focus and having causal powers of their own (compare Savage and Duncan, 1990; Warde, 1989).

In fact, realism certainly does not license such a view. Recall my earlier comments on contingency and determination: contingencies, local or otherwise, have to be defined in terms of relations; and their relata are not undetermined and hence beyond causal explanation or beyond the scope of theory. Likewise the particular character of localities may be internally related parts of larger entities and hence essential to an understanding of the latter.

Contrary to its arbitrary association with the 'general-processes-and-local-effects' formula, the realist model of causation also fits a quite different view of localities and causality in which the so-called general processes do not form first outside localities, space, or place, and then impact on them or 'touch-down' on them (a view which echoes the discredited division between nonspatial and spatial processes); rather the 'general processes' may actually be constituted in localities. The favourite example of the guardians of 'theory'—the capital – labour relation—is such an example, being reproduced most centrally in localities, albeit in a multitude of them. (This also indicates that we should not associate locality exclusively with uniqueness either; they have many general$_1$ features, just as supralocal phenomena may have unique features.)

As all objects, social or natural, have causal powers and liabilities, causation operates at all scales, including within localities. Some causal mechanisms may be unique or localised (not the same thing); others general$_1$ and either small or big. Some causal processes may span large areas; others may operate in small, restricted spaces. Consequently, *the 'general-causes-and-local-contingent-effects' model may sometimes be appropriate, but realism gives no special privilege to it, as many commentators on locality research (both advocates and opponents) have supposed. Other variants, such as local causes and local effects, or local causes and general or global effects, or global causes and global effects, are just as compatible with realism, and just as relevant for understanding society.*

Another variant of these problematic views opposes '*structures*' to local effects. This is often reinforced by a peculiar but common assumption in urban and regional studies, that 'structures' are always big or supralocal things (for example,

Savage et al, 1987). Yet structures range in 'size' from the global down to the interpersonal (for example, household structures) and beyond (for example, cognitive and bodily structures).

Alternatively, one sees some authors reacting against the treatment of localities as inert by presenting them as 'proactive', or centres of agency (for example, Cooke, 1989, page 11). Although Cooke admits agency at other levels too, this conceptualisation can easily slide into an alignment of the global (or supralocal) with 'structure', in opposition to an alignment of locality with agency. This not only maintains the unwarranted association of structure with scale but contradicts the realist and Giddensian view of structures by ignoring their possession of causal powers—a view which does not rest easily with the treatment of agency as opposed to structure (Bhaskar, 1979; Giddens, 1984).

8 Uniqueness, generality, and dependence
Now that the different uses of 'generality' and cognate terms have been identified, we can now proceed by deconstructing a common but incoherent pairing of dualisms:

> unique – general
> | |
> independent – interdependent

This cluster is one of the easiest to undermine. Arguments about it were implicit in the debates between idiographic and nomothetic geography and between the latter and so-called structuralism. It involves the assumptions that, if we are dealing with something unique, its explanation will be parochial, because the object is assumed to be independent of outside influences, and that conversely where we are dealing with or looking for general$_1$ phenomena we will find interdependence between objects.

The assumption that these dualisms are equivalent confuses purely formal relations of difference and similarity with substantial relations of material connection and interdependence (Sayer, 1984, page 82). In consequence it generates two related fallacies:
fallacy 1 that objects (for example, regions) which are unique must therefore be independent of one another;
fallacy 2 that objects which are widely replicated in essentially the same form (that is, generality$_1$) must be interdependent, though they might be.

With regard to fallacy 1, the uniqueness of a region (or whatever) may actually *derive* from its interdependencies with practices elsewhere, as in the case of the uniqueness of Northern Ireland and its relationship to Britain and the Republic of Ireland. In other words, uniqueness may be constituted through part – whole relations (generality$_2$). Fallacy 2 is less common, but through the rhetoric of systems theory, spatial analysis has often mistaken statistical associations (that is, purely formal relations) for material connections or interdependencies (substantial relations) between objects or 'system elements' (Sayer, 1984).

To avoid these fallacies, we need to recognise that the diagonal relationships (unique – interdependent and general – independent) can be compatible rather than opposed. Taking into account this possibility we arrive at four possible situations:
(1) *Unique and independent.* In some respects the uniqueness of our objects of study may not depend on what happens or has happened elsewhere: they may be genuinely independent.
(2) *General$_1$ and independent.* If there are many instances of the same kind of object or relationship, they may constitute generality in the sense of empirical regularity, but in this case the instances forming the regularity are independent of

one another or only externally related. (For example, nuclear families are numerous but not necessarily interdependent with one another—though each one is constituted through internal social relations.)

(3) *Unique and interdependent*. In other—usually more interesting—aspects, the uniqueness is precisely the result of interdependencies (in the strong sense of internal relations) with other objects, as in the Northern Ireland example. In some cases this kind of interdependence is equivalent to generality$_2$, that is, the unique relating to the general as part to whole.

(4) *General$_1$ and interdependent*. Empirical regularities or similarities may exist among events which are connected and interdependent.

Situations (1) and (2) prioritise external relations, (3) and perhaps (4), internal relations. This difference is related to the tendency of the last two forms to involve a much greater concern with conceptualisation than the first two forms; for, if all relations are conceived of as external, then the relata seem stable, simple, and straightforward to conceptualise, whereas if many relations are internal, and hence affect the nature of the relata, one needs to make the conceptualisation of the objects sensitive to this fact (Sayer, 1984).

Four metaphysics

For want of a better term, the above four cases might be called alternative 'metaphysics', ways of conceptually structuring the world in terms of objects and relations. For example, certain terms, or even whole languages, may be biased towards an atomistic or alternatively a relational view of the world. A metaphysic cannot provide an independent grounding for knowledge or science because it is itself influenced by language. The value of a particular metaphysic can only be justified by the practical success of the science or mode of thought which assumes it. Not surprisingly, major changes in modes of thought often involve struggles within particular languages to change their implicit metaphysical presuppositions; the conceptual struggles of those schooled in atomistic views of the world in coming to terms with Marx's relational metaphysic is a good example (Harvey, 1973; Ollman, 1971). Despite the absence of an independent foundation for grounding metaphysical systems, 'problematising' them can at least make us more aware of how apparently innocuous terms like 'general' presuppose and secrete particular views of the world and of method.[15]

However, I want to use the term metaphysic in an unconventional way, to denote basic systems which can coexist rather than mutually exclude one another. So my aim is not to deny any of these metaphysics a role but rather to suggest how their appropriateness varies according to the nature of the object of study.

It is noticeable that different authors, disciplines, and approaches tend to emphasise just one or two of the metaphysics, either by personal inclination, or in response to the nature of the phenomena in which they specialise. These different foci may be reasonably effective, but the danger is that we may become the prisoners of particular metaphysics and attempt to use them for inappropriate topics.

Some objects lend themselves more obviously to a particular metaphysic: thus particular spatial divisions of labour fit metaphysic (3), not (1) or (2), and (4) only if they are replicated. For other subjects, all four metaphysics may seem appropriate in some way. For example, a region may contain objects which are indeed unique and independent, as well as ones whose uniqueness derives from relationships with

[15] Those who are accustomed to purely pejorative uses of the term 'metaphysics' and who are consequently alarmed by the above should remember that the real prisoners of metaphysics are those who think they have none (compare Harré, 1972). Positivism thought that it could escape metaphysics, but the result was merely to hide its influence.

other entities, and to the whole. There are also invariably both kinds of generality; thus market forces and capital accumulation are general in the sense that they consist of widely replicated practices, but they are also part of a wider 'more general' whole—capitalism—where the individual elements and the whole are internally related. Some of the parts involved in part–whole relationships may be unique, some may be widely replicated.

Explanations in terms of the metaphysic of uniqueness and independence (1), or at least external relations were common in traditional idiographic geography and empiricist history, with a structureless view of facts awaiting description and enumeration. Traditional geography rarely went to the extreme of assuming unique places to be entirely independent of one another, but I would suggest that the conceptual grid prevented it from taking the interdependence and internal relations between places and objects sufficiently seriously, for example in underestimating the extent of developing countries' dependence on developed countries.

The emphasis on generality$_1$ and independence (and external relations) (2) is typical in the nomothetic, positivist approach characteristic of spatial analysis and neoclassical economics. Both have no time for uniqueness and believe that generality$_1$ can be found if suitable abstractions are made (though they are remarkably unconcerned about *how* they abstract, as long as it yields regularities). In their expositions of theory and in their rhetoric (for example, that of systems theory) they often stress *inter*dependence between objects or variables, though in terms of external rather than internal relations. However, in their empirical application, generality$_1$ and independence, in the shape of purely formal (for example, statistical) relations were dubiously taken as evidence of substantial relations of interdependence. They expected to find enduring regularities which could be codified in generalisations$_1$ or even laws, but did not seek out necessity in the world. In these ways, despite their opposition, traditional and nomothetic geography, (along with empiricist and positivist social science) *shared* a tendency to underestimate generality$_2$, along with variety and interdependence and internal relations. In consequence both found it difficult to understand the relational ontologies which were associated with structuralist ways of thinking.

Metaphysic (3)—interpreting the world in terms of internally related but often unique objects and part–whole relations—fits well with the Marxist concept of combined and uneven development, with historical studies, with locality studies as intended under the CURS initiative and with ethnographic studies of systems of meaning. In varying degrees these kinds of research break with the presumption—common in other social sciences—that we should be seeking generality$_1$ above all else, and instead they value the study of the internal coherence of their unique systems or objects.

Metaphysic (4) also acknowledges internal relations, and emphasises structures, in the sense of interlocking sets of internal relations. However, it prioritises the replication of similar structures and tries to generalise$_1$ about them. It is therefore less distinct from the nomothetic position and metaphysic (2). Allen Scott might be seen as a theorist who has worked predominantly within metaphysic (4), Doreen Massey predominantly within metaphysic (3) (Scott, 1980; 1989; Massey, 1984).

Bodies of theory are not neutral with respect to these metaphysics. Some, like neoclassical economics and regional science, tend to see all relations as external. They focus primarily on aspects of society which lend themselves to such a representation but also tend to try to extend into phenomena which do not.

By contrast, Marxist theory, as Ollman (1971) and Harvey (1973) have stressed, is distinguished by its emphasis on internal relations; thus it characterises class in terms of internal relations or structures, not as a matter of taxonomic classifications

in which individuals are grouped on the basis of similarities rather than connections (though few Marxist theorists have been able to resist the fateful temptation to make the structural categories function as taxonomic classifications too). However, it incorporates both (3) and (4) as its dominant metaphysics, and therein lies an important source of strength. The abstract theory of Marxism focuses on internal relations which tend to be widely replicated in the manner of generality$_1$. But concrete research in the Marxist tradition has also emphasised combined and uneven development, uniqueness and interdependence, or generality$_2$ [metaphysic (3)].

The difficult question, of course, often misnamed the problem of theory and history, concerns the respective weight of these two metaphysics and the relationships between them. In Marxism it is recognised that replicability is limited or bounded by the fact that social forms are historically specific. So in *Capital* there is an abstract theory of social structures, their constituent internal relations and their powers, for example, capital and wage-labour. These in turn are expected to be replicated as generalities$_1$—though not endlessly but within the geographical and historical bounds of capitalism. It attempts to discover the necessary properties and preconditions of these structures, features which will necessarily be generalisable to wherever those structures exist. However, just how widely replicated (general$_1$) those features are is contingent. Any attempt at applying this theory must acknowledge how the replicable features of capitalism take concrete forms (for example, different kinds of industry, technology, labour force) often characterised by variety or uniqueness and interdependence and how they are set within larger part–whole relationships.

Conversely, from the point of view of concrete research, historical studies of society in Marxism assume the existence of these general$_1$ structures and mechanisms, but concentrate on the forms they take, on combined and uneven development, etc. However, there is also a different tradition of trying to apply quite abstract theory in the form of an analytical model directly to concrete objects, as in the case of Scott's attempt to develop a general theory of industrial agglomeration. Although concrete social forms may be constituted in quite similar ways and hence be susceptible to such an analysis, the obvious risk is one of reductionism or misattribution of causality, that is, attributing to the mechanisms isolated in the model events actually caused by other mechanisms. (For a fuller discussion of this, see Sayer, 1989b.) This reminds us once again of the problem of to what extent social structures are constituted differently in different places and times.

To those accustomed to working primarily on abstract theory rather than on concrete research, the implicit reliance upon Marxist abstract theory in work on the latter, for example in studies of restructuring and localities, may seem like mere 'atmospherics' (Harvey, 1987). Yet such a judgement belies a misunderstanding of the difference between abstract and concrete research: the concrete-in-thought is the product of many abstractions, not something divorced from them. However, perhaps the complaint is actually not about the way in which the Marxist theory is largely implicit, but about the non-Marxist origin of some of the abstractions drawn upon. Nevertheless, as the domain of Marxist theory does not exhaust social reality, it is inevitable that even Marxist-informed concrete research should go beyond them. It may also help to remember the context-dependence–independence continuum mentioned earlier; although abstract theory tends to focus mainly on the replicable features of capitalism, abstracting from difference, its application to concrete (many-sided) objects has to confront differentiation and change in the structures which are the object of social theory.

The problem, then, is that particular metaphysics are overextended, or that attachment to them obscures vision of phenomena which fit poorly with them.

Consider the following case.

Much of the research undertaken or influenced by radical geography was formed through a reaction against positivist explanations which tried to use nomothetic methods and metaphysic (2) to explain the concrete and particular. However, when this methodology declined, so too, sadly, did interest in some of the chosen objects of study of those approaches, such as regional economics. Particularly in Britain, radical geography, of which the CURS studies are a descendant, made great strides in fields such as industrial restructuring, spatial divisions of labour, housing provision, and central–local government relations. All of these were rather concrete kinds of research which lent themselves to a metaphysic of uniqueness and interdependence and part–whole relations. I suspect that it was so successful that other phenomena and other questions which were more comprehensible in terms of a different metaphysic of widely replicated structures and mechanism—that is, metaphysic (4)—were neglected; for example, the problem of explaining the mechanisms by which regional growth occurs under capitalism. Hence the decline of regional economics and its substitution by concrete studies of regions as assemblages of firms and industries, whose behaviour was to be explained at that microlevel rather than at the level of regions, and in terms of particular instances of combined and uneven development or part–whole relations, rather than in terms of the $general_1$ mechanisms by which growth is transmitted across economies. Consequently, when confronted with a question concerning, say, the forces concentrating growth in the South East of England, we immediately assume that this can only be answered by going through the sectors one by one, rather than by considering some common ($general_1$) processes. Although this neglect has much to do with the sociology of knowledge, I would suggest that it is also a result of the habituation of large numbers of researchers into thinking in terms of a specific kind of metaphysic, (3)—that of variety and interdependence, and $generality_2$.[16]

To summarise then, what I am suggesting is: Our objects of study usually lend themselves to representation in terms of different metaphysics. Particular bodies of theory are not neutral with respect to different metaphysics but tend to operate mainly, though not entirely, with just one or two. We tend, as a result of theoretical affiliations and topic specialisations, to get into the habit of thinking mainly in terms of particular metaphysics. This can result in resistance or blindness to issues and researches more suited to different metaphysics. It is metaphysics (3), emphasising difference and interdependence that is most appropriate to locality research. This has met some resistance from those accustomed to working mainly on abstract theory and thinking in terms of metaphysic (4). As objects may differ in their susceptibility to conceptualisation in terms of particular metaphysics, we could benefit from a greater awareness of alternative metaphysics and the way in which they influence research.

The question of importance

The use of dualisms often involves a judgment about the relative importance of their opposing terms.[17] This has been common in the localities debate with the global being given a dominant role in relation to the local, as in 'structural effects

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[16] Storper and Walker's book (1989) represents something of a reaction against metaphysic (3) and a revival, albeit in modified form, of old concerns about the general processes of economic and territorial development.

[17] In deconstructionist theory it is assumed that one side of any dualism *must* be dominant, but this seems to me to be forced and arbitrary. It is not just that different users may ascribe the dominance differently but that there may not be an inequality at all in some cases.

and local responses'. Often, as we have seen repeatedly, this inequality is implied by giving terms scale connotations.

general – specific
    | |
abstract – concrete
    | |
global – local
    | |
important – unimportant

These judgments are often contested and sometimes the same term can acquire quite different associations of scale and importance. Thus 'context' can function as the superior term ("you have to see this in context") or as the inferior term ("the effects of the general processes may vary according to context"). In other words, like any argument, the localities debate, is not simply conducted in terms of explicit contentions ("this is more important than that") but through these rhetorical devices which tilt the argument with varying degrees of subtlety and persuasiveness. My point is not to try to outlaw such devices, for rhetoric is unavoidable; but it is as well to be aware of how it works.[18]

But it is quite probable that when pushed, some authors would indeed argue that the concerns of locality studies are less important, merely documenting the many ways to skin a cat: "while there may be differences in employment in Cheltenham and Swindon the important things are the general$_1$ ones; they are both capitalist cities and it is the common structures and mechanisms of capital or patriarchy which are important". Such judgments can only be assessed in relation to particular cases and questions. But then one can also argue about the relative importance of those questions and concerns behind the research. To follow that up is to move into a moral and political discussion of needs and priorities, and judgments of possibilities and trade-offs for political advance. There is nothing wrong with moving the debate to that level, indeed it might make for better mutual (and self-) understanding if these basic questions of our motives, functions, and political position as researchers were brought out into the open, instead of being the subject of a tacit consensus (compare Saunders and Williams, 1986).

Conclusion
I have been arguing that the controversies behind the localities debate have been confused by the use of unexamined sets of dualisms. These in turn are associated with differences in preferences for certain 'metaphysics' which exert a hidden influence over our perception.

Realist philosophy is particularly useful in this deconstruction, for it problematises common alignments of the dualisms present in its own and in other philosophies. It is therefore galling to find it being interpreted in the very terms, and with the very associations, which it is at pains to deconstruct. [First prize for this goes to Louise Johnson who wrote that "The method involves defining necessary (true, absolute, basic, general) and contingent (unique, individual, lived) characteristics of a concept/object" [sic!] (1987, page 213).]

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[18] I accept the deconstructionist point that one can never completely control meaning, and that unintended meanings always leak out somewhere, but it is absurd not to try, for successful communication and practice cannot take place otherwise. This applies to deconstructionists' own practice as much as anyone else's.

Although some of the arguments have served to defend locality studies from their critics, I do not accept all of the ways in which realist philosophy has been invoked for this purpose. And it may still be *possible* for localities research to fall into the traps of empiricism and parochialism. Realism is far more than a set of ideas about necessity and contingency or for thinking about localities. Although it can help with the latter it also provides (critical) rationales for abstract theoretical research and for concrete research on objects other than localities.

To those unaccustomed to philosophical analysis the above deconstructions may seem to render the simple complex, but it is the hidden complexities which are tripping up the contributors to the debate on theory and empirics and on locality in geography at every turn. Whatever the value of the arguments, I am certain that further examination of these matters is needed if the confusion is not to multiply. The onus is on those who find the analysis unsatisfactory to provide their own, alternative and detailed, normative explications.

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