

## The Universalistic and Contextualizing Movements in Geography

**S.I. Okafor**

Department of Geography University of Ibadan

*The universalistic and contextualizing movements are the dominant epistemological traditions in geography, especially human geography. Contextualization is an approach that regards time-space settings as important in the production of landscapes of human activity and in the past this approach focused on the description of places. On the other hand, the universalistic movement took geography away from its earlier concern with the description of places into attempts at uncovering universal laws of spatial organization, in keeping with the scientific method. This movement led to the devaluation of place in geographical analysis. The failings and unfulfilled expectations of the universalistic movement led to a return to contextualization as a result of which greater attention is again being paid to local milieu in accounting for spatial variations of human activities. The new emphasis on diversity and difference which the contextualizing movement makes possible provides an opportunity for addressing specifically African issues in spite of the hegemony of Western intellectual traditions.*

Geography is commonly regarded as the study of the spatial variation of phenomena on the earth's surface. Abler et al.(1971) in their relatively old classic put it more succinctly when they observe that "no other science consistently concerns itself with the distribution of phenomena in terrestrial space; no other science consistently concerns itself with spatial structure. The questions about location, spatial structure, and spatial process which we ask and answer distinguish geography from the other sciences" (Abler et al., 1971:61). The phenomena that geographers study fall into two broad groups, namely physical phenomena and human-created ones. This forms the basis of the broad two-fold division of the discipline into physical geography and human geography; it is the latter that is considered to be a social science. Johnston et al. (1994:259) define human geography as "that part of the discipline of geography concerned with the spatial differentiation and organization of human activity and with human use of the physical environment".

Given the nature and history of geography, place (or region) has always been the context (i.e., the time-space setting) for geographical work. Therefore, in a sense, much of this work is contextualized, indicating recognition of the importance of local milieux. However, the fortune

of the "region" has waxed and waned in the history of geography. Also, the effect of place or region as context was theorized differently in what is now called the old regional geography (as opposed to the new regional geography). As will be discussed shortly, the physical environment is a prime causal factor in the old regional geography, whereas the new regional geography gives primacy to culture, which itself is influenced by the physical environment. The connection between culture and the environment is captured by Johnston (1991a:50) as follows: "for a variety of reasons, some associated with the local physical environment, people's responses to the problems of surviving collectively vary from place to place, at a whole range of scales. How they respond becomes part of the local culture ...". Thus, in one case the importance of place is a result of the physical environment, while in the other it is a result of culture.

Contextualization in geography is new and not new. It is not new because place has always served as context as epitomized by regional geography. It is new because of the resurgence of place (even though conceptualized differently) in contemporary human geography. Somewhere in-between the emergence of the old and the new forms of contextualization came the introduction of the scientific method in geography, with its

emphasis on generalization, laws, and theories. This development led to a devaluation of place in geographical analysis and the partial eclipse of regional geography. Human geography has therefore participated in the two different histories that are of interest to this paper; the universalistic movement and the contextualizing movement. This paper situates these two movements and assesses the contribution of geography to the production of knowledge, among other concerns. However, before addressing these central concerns of the paper, it is important to stress the human geography in Anglophone Africa has a strong Anglo-American legacy (Okafor, 1989). This has had implications for the “rules of the game” and the nature of the dominant discourses.

### **Context and Contextualization**

Contextualization is an approach that regards time–space settings as important (indeed essential) to the constitution of human activities. In geography, place, locality, locale, or region (the difference between them being partly a matter of scale) is one such setting. In underlining the significance of place (region), Johnson (1991a:49) describes the world, as “comprising a complex mosaic of specific places within which general processes are enacted but whose features cannot be accounted for by those processes alone”. Places always modify or resist these general processes, be they economic, political, or cultural (Knox and Marston, 2004). These views represent the contemporary interpretation of the significance of place as context in geographical analysis. We shall return to this “new” contextualizing movement later. For now, we shall address the issue of context and contextualization in the early history of modern geography.

In discussing the development of geography Chisholm (1979:20) observes that “from about 1800 the emphasis shifted to the problems posed in recording what places, now accurately located, are like and how far one place is similar to or different from another”. In other words, the description of regions became a central concern in geography, and from 1800 up until World War II, regional geography occupied center stage in the discipline. What this approach did was to demarcate regions which are more or less internally homogenous, and provide a comprehensive account of the physical

geography and different aspects of the human occupancy of the regions. The region or place is expected to show some distinct individuality, and therefore difference from other regions or places. The region thus served as a context for the discussion of human activities. Therefore, regional treatises were contextual discussions. Implicit in these accounts was the assumption of environmental influence on the patterns of human activity. In addition, the demarcation of regions implied some form of (areal) classification. Traditional regional geography was thus regarded as “... an attempt at generalization, but at generalization without structured explanation...” (Johnston, 1991b:42). Explanations of the patterns of human activity were sought in the physical environment—environmental determinism. Environmental determinism has been described as the first but somewhat calamitous attempt to provide a general theoretical framework for explaining the spatial pattern of human activities (Chisholm, 1979). Subsequently, the connection with the environment was mellowed somewhat. As Cloke et al. (1991:7) have it “an early focus in some countries on environmental determinism—in the sense of environment creating the linkage of elements within regions via direct unilinear causes—gave way in later years to more diffuse, possibilist approach in which the environment set certain limits or bounds to human existence, to which society responded in different ways and, in turn, impacted upon the constitution of that so-called ‘natural’ environment”.

However, the regional treatises associated with the regional paradigm in geography were largely atheoretical and have been aptly described as being long on facts and short on theory. This approach is now referred to as the traditional regional geography (Johnston, 1991a). But it did contribute significantly to knowledge about the character of places, geographical differences in the patterns of human activities, and the different ways in which different communities and societies respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by their environments. Within this tradition, important works on Africa include those by Hance (1967) and Harrison Church (1964). There are several others on different subregions of Africa (e.g., Udo, 1978) and on individual countries of Africa (e.g., Buchanan and Pugh, 1958). The Anglo-American legacy alluded to earlier is clearly evident in these works in terms

of the subjects discussed and their organization which suggest some element of environmental determinism. Typically, the patterns of human occupancy are discussed in a manner that suggests a direct link with the physical environment.

The history of the contextualizing movement in contemporary human geography dates back to the early 1970s. The movement came about as a reaction to the scientific method and the universalistic movement in human geography (there were other reactions though). The universalistic movement was concerned with the development of laws and theories in geography; laws and theories whose hallmark was meant to be their universality. Within the framework of this scientific paradigm in geography, the association of phenomena within an area is regarded as only one aspect of a more general relationship between spatial patterns and interaction processes (Blunden et al., 1978). However, many of the laws and theories were not very successful in explaining the patterns which exist in reality. These failures brought about the emergence of alternative approaches, some of which recognized that generalizations are context-dependent.

Thrift (1983) regards the contextual approach as an attempt to recapture the flow of human agency as a series of situated events in space and time. The renewed recognition of local context in the constitution of social life is often associated with Hagerstrand (1973, 1976, 1984). For example, he speaks of processes that cannot unfold freely, "... but have to accommodate themselves under the pressures and opportunities which follow from their common existence in terrestrial space and time" (Hagerstrand, 1976). For human geography, this approach represents the revival of work which focuses on local variability but does not overemphasize the uniqueness of places as traditional regional geography did. The interest of the contextual approach in diversity and difference rather than in relations of similarity also connects it with the new regional geography and with postmodernism.

In keeping with the spirit of the contextual approach, the new regional geography recognizes that social processes operate in historically and geographically specific circumstances and their understanding requires a sensitivity to geographical variations (Lee, 1985). This is what is implied when Knox and Marston (2004) make the point

that place modifies general processes. The reason is not far fetched. The configuration of conditions under which general processes operate varies from place to place; they are not constant. Therefore, the outcomes of the operation of these processes often vary from place to place. In other words, every place has its own particular configuration of conditions, and this is responsible for the variegated outcomes that characterize the geographical landscape. The transformations in South Africa have presented opportunities for examining the significance of place in reconstructing the spatial legacies of apartheid which are embedded in the geography of the country. Oelofse and Dodson (1997) studied the establishment of an informal settlement in Hout Bay, a Cape Town suburb, and cautioned that the project should not be regarded as a blueprint for the postapartheid reconstruction of urban places in South Africa. They stress "... that it is the particular attribute of each locality—attributes environmental, social, economic and political—that need to be considered in deciding the appropriateness of similar developments in the future". In other words, the particular configuration of conditions in different places will be an important determinant of the outcome (i.e., success or failure) of informal settlement projects. Hout Bay is not a universal model.

Clearly, the continued existence of regional diversity in the face of globalization and the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism make time-space settlements (i.e., places) significant (Pudup, 1988, and Gilbert, 1988). This thinking clearly sets the central concerns of the new regional geography within the literature on postmodernism. One important feature of postmodernism is its rejection of grand theories or meta-narratives which do not recognize the diversities, discontinuities, and disjunctions that characterize modern life. The postmodern perspective recognizes the local dimension, and by extension, diversity and difference. And "for some geographers, the appeal of this approach, with its emphasis on 'heterogeneity, particularity and uniqueness' ... is that it provides a theoretical context for the study of regional diversity" (Johnston, 1991b:249). Johnston went on to stress that "if general theories (or meta-narratives) cannot account for the variety which geographers observe, then an approach which can be needed. Postmodernism offers a framework for that

....” (p. 251).

The contextual movement in geography has some links with structuration theory. The duality between structure and agency is one of the main features of the literature employing the contextual approach in human geography. Human agency is explicitly recognized; but so too is structure which constrains or enables behavior. This is evident, for instance, in the reference to the regional conditioning of society and the effect of society on region. On the other hand, by focusing on the individual, postmodernism recognizes the importance of agency. It does not deny agency to individuals and social groups. This perspective has strengthened the existing links between geography and the other social sciences, especially sociology and political science. Geographers have employed the approach in the study of voting behavior, finding in the process that it is affected by the local context of the voters (Agnew, 1984, 1987; Johnston, 1986a). The postmodern perspective has gotten many geographers interested in gender issues and has established feminist geography on a sound footing in the discipline (Bowbly et al., 1989; McDowell, 1986). Some African geographers are beginning to examine issues from a feminist rather than a neutral (and therefore implicitly male) perspective. For example, Akinbode (1996) studied the adverse effects of migrant labor on women in northern Togo, chief among which are the undermining of women's economic position and social status, as well as the breakdown of family structure. Iyun (1996) on her part highlighted the impact of oil exploration on fishing activities in Ondo State, Nigeria. This has adversely affected the well-being of women in the area. Women are prominent in the processing and sale of fish. Postmodernism is also evident in the interest of geographers in the geographies of industrial production under postfordism (Scott and Cooke, 1988; Scott and Storper, 1985). Postfordism is a postmodern phenomenon, and “involves a distinctive shift and fragmentation in the temporal and, more pertinently, the spatial organization of economic, social, political and cultural processes” (Mabogunje, 1997:37). This organizational and geographical fragmentation (Johnston, 1993) resonates with postmodernism's concern with diversity and difference. An important consequence of postmodernism's emphasis on diversity and difference is the growing interest of

social scientists in local or indigenous knowledge systems, including local organizations. The latter are regarded as important institutional resources for the promotion of development from below. Geographers are important participants in this project and have contributed to our understanding of the role of indigenous organizations in the development process in Africa (see, for instance, Honey and Okafor, eds., 1998, which contains important contributions by geographers).

### **The Universalistic Movement**

As indicated in the introduction, the universalistic movement is commonly associated with the introduction of the scientific method in geography. Prior to its introduction, geography was essentially an idiographic discipline based on the philosophy of exceptionalism. Dissatisfaction with the descriptive and empiricist nature of this geography, and the need to move beyond description to explanation were among the reasons for the adoption of the scientific method. Since the scientific method is based on the formulation and testing of hypotheses it is no accident that the scientific method ushered in the quantitative revolution in geography. Quantitative methods involve the use of statistics and mathematics—the former for testing hypotheses and the latter for building models. This development represented an important methodological (and philosophical) shift in geography. The import of this shift is underlined by Cloke et al., (1991:9) when they observe that it took “geography as a subject away from its earlier concern with the description of ‘unique’ places and into attempts at uncovering universal spatial laws governing the way in which the world worked. This intellectual shift to a discipline conceived as spatial science represented a clear change of emphasis, one that only made sense in the context of a belief in a fundamentally ordered creation, resting on universal rules of spatial organization...”. This shift was a post-World War II development and was partly inspired by the perceived superiority of the generalizing or nomothetic approach over the descriptive or idiographic approach.

Since it is believed that there is some order underlying the spatial pattern of human activities, emphases shifted to the development of laws and theories of spatial organization. As in the natural sciences, the formulation and testing of hypotheses

is central to this effort. So, too, is quantification. In this dispensation, geography was defined as spatial science and "... was therefore expected no longer to be content with simply describing, but like a strict science, should be able to formulate predictive laws of spatial behaviour as well as uncover laws or rules governing observable spatial regularities" (Mabogunje, 1997:22). Off all the influences on spatial behavior, the spatial approach privileges distance. Patterns of spatial organization were regarded as a manifestation of the effect of distance on spatial behavior (Johnston, 1991b).

Chisholm (1979) categorizes the theories in human geography into two, namely, positive and normative theories. Positive theories are meant to represent the world as it is while normative theories represent reality as it should be, if certain objectives are to be met. Normative theories therefore serve as yardsticks for evaluating real world distributions on the basis of spatial efficiency or some other criteria. Regardless of whether or not they are positive or normative, four types of theories can be identified in contemporary human geography. These are theories of location, theories of interaction or movement, theories of growth and development, and finally, theories of decision making and choice (Mabogunje, 1997). However, these theories did not quite meet the high hopes of their protagonists in terms of their predictive and explanatory capabilities. Besides, their universalist claims could not be sustained. For example, Mabogunje's (1968) work on Nigerian cities clearly revealed the limitations of the theories of urban structure in the Nigerian setting, due partly to the fact that land is not fully commodified. Although they provided very useful insights into our understanding of geographical phenomena, both the humanist and Marxist perspectives also made universalist and grand theoretical claims. For example, implicit in both perspectives is the belief that the human world is ordered coherently on the basis of some organizing principles and therefore can be explained in terms of these principles. The principles are mode of production and its associated social relations in the case of Marxism, and the subjectivity of human beings in the case of humanism. These organizing principles are virtually ascribed the status of causal factors. All these observations set the stage for the return of place in geographical analysis, and the realization that theories and explanations are context-dependent.

What the contextualizing movement has done is to introduce greater subtlety and circumspection in geographical analysis. But very importantly, it has also provided a framework that offers opportunities for situating knowledge; for representing other voices and other cultures. It thus has the potential for further promoting the production of knowledge on African dynamics.

### **Legacies, Contributions, etcetera**

Contemporary human geography was no doubt constructed in Europe and North America. Add to this the fact that many non-Western geographers were trained in Western universities or Third World universities modeled after Western ones, and the dominance of theories, methodologies, and epistemologies associated with Western universities becomes understandable. In Africa, this is part of our colonial legacy. Little wonder, therefore, that paradigms and paradigm shifts in Africa mirror the situation in Western (especially Anglo-American) human geography. Nigerian human geography is a clear case in point (Okafor, 1989). The paradigms define the rules governing knowledge production. Four main approaches have been identified. These are the empiricists approaches, the positivist approaches, the humanistic approaches, and the structuralist approaches (Johnston, 1986b). These four approaches coexist in contemporary human geography but as Johnston, (1986b:6) has it, "... positivist approaches dominated the Anglo-American research practice of human geography in the 1960s. Since then, humanistic and structuralist approaches have been introduced initially very much as critiques of the positivist but increasingly as separate research schools making their own distinctive contributions to knowledge". The coexistence of multiple perspectives in human geography is regarded as a good thing since it provides an understanding of greater dimensionality (Blunden et al., 1978). No one explanation can claim privileged status.

Smith's (1994:9) discussion of the problem of explaining inner city poverty is very apposite and is quoted here in extenso to illustrate the point:

*One approach would be to observe the spatial association poverty and population characteristics, finding perhaps that*

*members of particular racial or ethnic groups ... were concentrated in the poverty areas, which could lead to the conclusion that there is something about their way of life predisposing them to poverty. Another would be to observe the spatial mismatch between inner-city residential area and the concentration of employment opportunities elsewhere, concluding that the problem was one of physical accessibility. A third explanation could be found in the operation of the markets for labour and housing in a capitalist economy, which tends to consign some people to unemployment and poverty and to place many of them in the inner-city... There is something in each explanation... The first explanation blames the victims, the second the spatial structure of the city, and the third the prevailing mode of production.*

Smith's observation not only illustrates the greater dimensionality of understanding which the multiple perspectives make possible; it also exemplifies the type of issues that contemporary human geography addresses (poverty in this case). Human geography was more commonly associated with the study of rural and urban settlements, agriculture, manufacturing industries, population, and the like. In addition to these concerns, geographers now study quality of life and human well-being as geographically variable conditions. Location matters in these things and geographers have made important contributions in elucidating these connections. As Smith (1979:18) argues "if standards of living vary according to where people live, then geographical space and the organization of life in this space may have a bearing on who gets what. While other social scientists may stress the role of political power, class structure, group conflict or the organization of production and distribution... the geographer stresses the way in which the spatial structure of the economy and society may work to the advantage of some people in some places and to the disadvantage of others". The hallmark of geography is that it brings the spatial perspective to bear on the production of knowledge on the human condition; no other social science puts space and location first.

## Conclusion

Human geography has clearly participated in both the universalistic movement and the contextualizing movement in the social sciences. Given the nature of geography, much of the work in the discipline is set in space-time contexts. Therefore, contextualization is not that new in geography. Geographers have always paid attention to local milieu in accounting for spatial variations of human activities. However, in the initial phase of this endeavor the local physical environment was emphasized in what were largely descriptive, atheoretical accounts. But its contemporary phase emphasizes the way place impacts and modifies general processes, and is theoretical even if not universalistic. The purpose is to produce "local theories" with no grand claims. Place has become all the more important in geographical analysis because of the continued existence of diversity on the landscape in the face of globalization and other homogenizing tendencies that characterize modern society. Contextualization therefore provides a framework and an opportunity for producing knowledge on local dynamics in different places.

The contextualizing movement in human geography was a reaction to the failings and unfulfilled expectations of the universalistic movement. This latter movement led to a devaluation of place in geographical analysis, in its quest for scientific laws and theories. In spite of its failings, the universalistic movement remains important in human geography even if in a circumscribed form. Because geography is essentially the study of place and of spatial variations within and between places, knowledge of local dynamics has always been part of its output. But a strong European legacy has brought about a preponderance of received concepts, theories, and methodologies in the practice of human geography in Africa. The type of knowledge produced is defined by the prevailing paradigms. However, the new emphasis on diversity and difference, which the contextualizing movement makes possible, provides a window of opportunity for addressing specifically African issues in spite of the hegemony of Western intellectual traditions.

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### Biographical Note

Stanley Okafor is a Professor of Geography in the University of Ibadan. His teaching and research interests are in political geography, regional and international development, medical geography, and geographic thought.