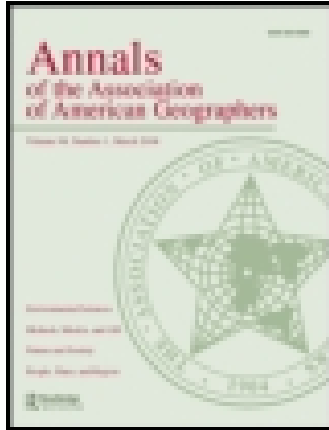


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### Thinking Geographically: Globalizing Capitalism and Beyond

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# Thinking Geographically: Globalizing Capitalism and Beyond

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In the spirit of strengthening its intellectual foundations and clarifying its contributions to making sense of Earth, we should resist any inclination to treat geography as a club—a discipline with boundaries to be policed and defended. I advocate for the strengths of thinking geographically, a way of being in the world open to all. This means attending to the geography of knowledge production; how spatiotemporalities shape and are shaped by socionatural processes; the emergent more-than-human world; the variety of ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies underlying knowledge claims; and the world not only as it is but also as it should be. Thinking geographically about globalizing capitalism can problematize the particular sociospatial positionalities from which commonsense understandings of capitalism have metastasized. Europe did not invent capitalist practices but became globalizing capitalism's center of calculation, catalyzed by the spatial dynamics of colonialism elevating Europe relative to its predecessors. Thinking geographically undermines the mainstream account of globalizing capitalism emanating from Europe, that of a rising tide capable of lifting all boats and bringing prosperity to all hard-working and responsible individuals and well-governed territories. Indeed, such body- and place-based accounts obscure how asymmetric connectivities between places and interscalar dynamics, coevolving with uneven geographical development, coproduce unequal sociospatial positionality and conditions of possibility for those propagating and encountering globalizing capitalism. Capitalism also cannot be understood, or practiced, simply as an economic process; its economic aspects are co-implicated with political, cultural (gendered, raced, etc.), social, and biophysical processes, in ways that repeatedly exceed and undermine any "laws of economics." Thinking geographically necessitates acknowledging space for alternative, more-than-capitalist experiments and trajectories, enriched by peripheral experiences of and encounters with globalizing capitalism. *Key Words: capitalism, geography, globalization, sociospatial positionality.*

本着强化地理学的知识基础、并阐明地理学对于理解地球的贡献之精神，我们应抗拒任何将地理学视为俱乐部——一门边界必须被保卫和防御的学科之倾向。我提倡以地理学的角度进行思考的长处，亦即一种身处于世、并向世界开放的方式。这意味着关注知识生产的地理；空间时间性如何形塑社会自然过程、并同时被社会自然过程给形塑；浮现中的超人类世界；支撑各种知识宣称的本体论、认识论及方法论基础的多样性；以及不仅关乎世界实际上是什么，亦关乎世界应是如何。以地理的角度对全球化的资本主义进行思考，得以问题化特定的社会空间的位置性，而对于资本主义的普世性理解，便是在这之上进行转移。欧洲并未发明资本主义实践，而是成为全球化资本主义的计算中心，并受到将欧洲提升至与其先行者相应的殖民主义的空间动态所催化。从地理的角度思考，颠覆了有关全球化的资本主义源自于欧洲的主流说法，该说法主张能够像涨潮一般浮起所有的船、使所有人皆获益，并为所有勤奋工作和负责的个人以及治理完善的领土带来繁荣。此般根据身体和地方的说法，的确掩盖了与不均地理发展共同演化的各地方与跨尺度动态之间的不平衡连结，如何为传播和经历全球化资本主义者，共同生产不均的社会空间的位置性。资本主义亦不可仅被理解或实践成一种经济过程；它的经济面向，不断地以超越和削弱任何“经济法则”的方式，与政治、（诸如性别化与种族化的）文化、社会和生物物理过程共同发生连带。以地理的角度思考，必须认可受到边陲经验及其与全球化资本主义相遇所丰富的另类、超越资本主义的实验及轨道的空间。 *关键词：资本主义，地理学，全球化，社会空间位置性。*

Dentro del espíritu de fortalecer sus cimientos intelectuales y clarificar sus contribuciones para darle sentido a la Tierra, debemos frenar cualquier inclinación a tratar a la geografía como un club—una disciplina con fronteras para ser patrulladas y defendidas. Yo propugno por las fortalezas de pensar geográficamente, una manera de estar en el mundo abierto a todos. Esto significa prestar atención a la geografía de la producción de conocimiento; cómo las espaciotemporalidades configuran los procesos socionaturales, y a la vez son configuradas por éstos; el

mundo emergente más que humano; la variedad de ontologías, epistemologías y metodologías que subrayan las afirmaciones del conocimiento; y el mundo, no solo como es sino como debiera ser. Pensar geográficamente acerca del capitalismo globalizante puede problematizar las posicionalidades socioespaciales particulares a partir de las cuales los entendimientos de sentido común del capitalismo han hecho metástasis. Europa no inventó las prácticas capitalistas pero se convirtió en el centro de cálculo del capitalismo globalizante, catalizado por la dinámica espacial del colonialismo que elevaron a Europa en comparación con sus predecesores. Pensar geográficamente socava la cuenta de la arteria vital del capitalismo globalizante que emana de Europa, el de una marejada capaz de levantar todas las embarcaciones y traer prosperidad a todos los trabajadores tenaces y responsables y a los territorios bien gobernados. En verdad, tales cuentas basadas en cuerpo y lugar ocultan la manera como conectividades asimétricas entre los lugares y la dinámicas interesalar, evolucionando simultáneamente con el desarrollo geográfico desigual, coproducen la posicionalidad y las condiciones de posibilidad socioespacial desiguales para aquellos que propagan y encuentran el capitalismo globalizante. El capitalismo tampoco puede entenderse, o practicarse, simplemente como un proceso económico; sus aspectos económicos están co-implicados con procesos políticos, culturales (afectados por problemas de género, racializados, etc.), sociales y biofísicos, en maneras que repetidamente exceden y socavan cualquiera de las “leyes de la economía”. Para pensar geográficamente se necesita conceder espacio a alternativos experimentos y trayectorias más que capitalistas, enriquecidos con experiencias periféricas del capitalismo globalizante y encuentros con el mismo. *Palabras clave: capitalismo, geografía, globalización, posicionalidad socioespacial.*

When Wilhelm von Humboldt founded Germany's first state university in 1810, Berliner Universität (now Die Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), his vision shaped the subsequent organization of knowledge production in the European American academy. In the context of the European enlightenment and aspirations to encyclopedic knowledge, Humboldt envisioned a “Universitas litterarum”: unifying research and teaching into what we would now call a liberal arts education. Humanities were an essential part of this, following the pedagogic vision of the first rector, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. From the perspective of the German imperial state funding this project, the goal was nation-building; the articulation of an imagined national community (Anderson 1991). “Object and process unite organically, and the place they unite is the University, which thus gives the people an idea of the nation-state to live up to and the nation-state a people capable of living up to that idea” (Readings 1996, 65). The reinvention of universities as arms of the nation-state instead of centers of religious instruction also marked the migration of secular knowledge production into the spaces of the university (beyond the homes of learned gentlemen and their learned societies; Shapin 1998; Livingstone 2000). For most of the European nation-states promulgating such institutions after 1810, the nation-state was inseparable from colonial and imperial expansion. National-scale knowledge production was thus closely bound up with collecting and producing knowledge of the larger world, also for colonial and imperial purposes (cf. Law 1996).

This was the age of classification in European thought (Foucault [1971] 1973), with much effort

devoted to collecting and classifying the world known to Europeans (including Wilhelm's brother Alexander's efforts: Humboldt 1845–1862). In this spirit, Wilhelm classified knowledge production into four faculties at the new university: law, medicine, philosophy (with Hegel as the professor), and theology. At Alexander's urging, other disciplines were added in science and mathematics. Geography, with history, was categorized into the humanities, with an *ausserordentlichler* Professor hired in geography (Johann August Zeune). The subsequent appointment of Carl Ritter popularized the field (Karl Marx took his lectures), culminating in the first state university Geography Department in 1887.

In this place and time, it seemed natural to organize the university into disciplines, to be aggregated into a broader scale categorical structure of Fakultäten, or Colleges—posing a quandary for geography ever since. Geography's intellectual range, from the humanities to the natural sciences, exceeds any attempt to suborn it into a categorical structure of knowledge production. Of course, this very disciplinary structure repeatedly has been challenged by initiatives fostering interdisciplinarity, through cross-cutting curricula, programs, centers, institutes, and clusters. Such initiatives make geography attractive as “the interdisciplinary discipline” whose members (we argue) are uniquely suited to such projects. But they simultaneously challenge geography's status as a discipline, with such initiatives as environmental studies, global studies, and urban studies seemingly reinventing what geographers do. Further, interdisciplinary initiatives repeatedly founder on the rocks, and accumulated bureaucratic power, of disciplines.

Disciplines are what economists would call clubs, functioning simultaneously to exclude and include on the basis of membership. We think of geography's boundaries as fuzzier than most, but boundaries they remain—to be defended on the basis of constructing an essence of hard-core intellectual principles to be resorted to when borders are threatened (Lakatos 1970), calling into existence an imagined disciplinary community. Geographers, of course, struggle to agree on exactly what that essence is: a weakness in an academic world of disciplines but a strength in other contexts. As Groucho Marx put it, resigning from the Friar's Club of Beverly Hills: "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member." Instead of struggling over what constitutes the disciplinary club of geography, who belongs, and how it fares relative to other such clubs, in this article I make the case for the importance of thinking geographically. Constructing knowledge production around disciplinary clubs fosters essentialism (what constitutes geography's hard core?), the making and patrolling of boundaries (who is in or out?), rivalry and competition (how does our performance compare to that of other clubs?), none of which is conducive to the hard, risky, and necessarily collaborative work of knowledge production. Unlike disciplines, thinking geographically can be inclusive. It is an activity that all humans can participate in, and indeed do so in their daily lives. Thinking geographically is hard but brings profoundly distinct insights into what goes on at the earth's surface. In so doing, it hails certain ways of acting in the world—geographical praxis, if you will—the implications of which could be significant in their own right.

This article is organized into three sections. First, I lay out the intellectual cartography of what it means to think geographically. Second, I examine what it means to think geographically about globalizing capitalism—the currently hegemonic way in which economic activities (are thought to) interact with socionature—and how thinking geographically profoundly disrupts mainstream, Pollyannaish representations of the nature and consequences of globalizing capitalism. Third, I draw implications for acting in the world that stem from this disruptive intervention.

## Thinking Geographically

Thinking geographically should not seek consensus around a monist body of knowledge, grounded in some

Lakatosian hard-core principles. It means attending to the geography of knowledge production, and to the variety of ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies underlying knowledge claims. It means attending to how spatiotemporalities shape and are shaped by socionatural processes, and to the more-than-human world that emerges from the interdependencies between human conception and action and the materialities we inhabit. Finally, it entails practicing engaged pluralism: ongoing open-ended debate and mutual criticism between differently positioned knowledge producers, willing to learn from one another's local epistemologies, and aspiring to thinking about how the world could be—not only how it is.

## Geographical Knowledge Production

Thinking geographically means attending to the geography of how humans produce knowledge—to where and when ideas become persuasive, the mechanisms through which they move through space-time, and their effects on the world. Only some beliefs about the world achieve the status of knowledge; if we are to achieve reliable understandings of the world, we need to critically reflect on how that happens and the grounds through which certain perspectives become hegemonic. As Longino (2002) argued, those beliefs that we take as reliable enough to call knowledge function as monisms—statements about the world whose validity is taken for granted. Newton's law of gravitation is one example, as are our understandings of how primates behave, or the free trade doctrine (free trade is a rising tide that lifts all boats). Yet, as Longino also argued, and others have demonstrated (e.g., Haraway 1991; Shapin 1996), all such monisms begin as local epistemologies—ways of knowing events that make sense in particular contexts. They gain status as a monism by taking wing, scaling up to seemingly clarify all instances of such events. Philosophers of science and technology have come to question the naturalness of such rescaling. First, our experiences of the world are theory-laden—what we seem to experience and take as meaningful depends on the presuppositions we bring to the world (Popper 1959). Second, knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988): What a person comes to know depends on how he or she is situated, socially but also geographically, relative to other knowledge producers (cf. Tuan 1977). Third, knowledge production is a highly distributed process that cannot be reduced to the great men and institutions claiming

originality for an idea; it reflects the actions of multi-farious, more-than-human, participants in extensive and shifting actor-networks of knowledge production (Latour 1987). Fourth, the production and mobility of what counts as knowledge is shot through with power relations, through which certain ideas gain the status of commonsense knowledge, whereas others are relegated to the status of particular, poorly justified, beliefs. What comes to count as knowledge, then, can reflect the power and influence of select knowledge producers, as much as it does the reliability of that knowledge (Kuhn 1962; Foucault [1975] 1977; Latour 1987; Harding 1991).

Approaching this problematic geographically means attending to the spatiotemporality of knowledge production. Beginning with what I have called the sociospatial positionality (Sheppard 2002) of those producing knowledge, it is necessary to trace which local epistemologies come to travel and how other knowledges, emanating from other positionalities, are sidelined by—or regress to—those that become monisms. In feminist theory, positionality was coined to make sense of the social situatedness of subjects “in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other axes of social difference” (Nagar and Geiger 2007, 267). In this view, differently positioned subjects have distinct identities, experiences, and perspectives, shaping their understanding of and engagement with the world, their ontological and epistemological stance, and their actions. Yet positionality is sociospatial. For example, third-world women are distinctly positioned by comparison to their first-world counterparts, undermining facile claims of a global feminism (Mohanty 2003). As in network thinking, sociospatial positionality is a relational concept, emphasizing the connectivities between differently positioned but also unequally empowered subjects. Positionality addresses both difference and inequality but also questions the generality and normative status of any single positionality. For example, empowering women in a patriarchal society entails undermining the taken-for-grantedness of masculine norms and practices. Finally, sociospatial positionality is continually reenacted. Reenactments routinely reproduce preexisting positionalities—giving them a seemingly natural durability—but occasionally radically reshape the power geometry of sociospatial positionalities, elevating what were marginal epistemologies to the center of knowledge production. The challenge all of this poses for knowledge production is the possibility that knowledge produced from certain positionalities falsely becomes accepted as knowledge for all.

Thinking geographically about knowledge production also means engaging across a wide, at times seemingly contradictory, range of ontological starting points for knowledge production. During the long twentieth century, Anglophone geographical thought has generated a wide range of “isms” that at various points in time have been advanced as the philosophical starting point for geographical knowledge: empiricism (logical), positivism, phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, structuralism, Marxism, critical realism, feminism, poststructuralism, and related post- prefixed approaches (Barnes 1996), relationality, materiality, and so on. This ever-expanding list has been simultaneously very productive of new knowledge and quite disabling. (Although these debates have been particularly prevalent in human geography, their relevance for other areas of the discipline cannot be overlooked: Church 1996; Rhoads and Thorn 1996; Harrison and Dunham 1998; Leszczynski 2009; Inkpen and Wilson 2013; Lave et al. 2014.) As turnover times have shortened, and babies have been rejected along with the bath water, categorizing geographical thought into competing “isms” is becoming as problematic as the classification of academic knowledge production into disciplines with which I began.

How might this philosophical proliferation be approached more productively? A useful starting point is to acknowledge that existing scholarship, although highly variegated, cannot conform to the ideals of any particular philosophical school (Sheppard 2014). Rather, these schools function as ideal types that scholars use to justify knowledge claims and identify with intellectual communities. Instead of tables of “isms” and their essential properties, then, consider the relational visualization depicted in Figure 1. At the poles of this epistemological triangle are the three ontologies that, in their pure form, have been proposed by European enlightenment philosophers: logical empiricism/positivism (in which observation is the key to explaining the world), structuralism (in which the world is explained as the consequence of unobservable underlying forcing mechanisms), and idealism or hermeneutics (in which meaning making is the key to understanding the world). Each pole depicts an extreme position. Logical empiricism makes the ontological claim that the world is just “out there,” awaiting humans to discover it; observations must be collected and ordered and theories tested on the basis of their empirical predictions (Harvey 1969). Structuralism insists that observation conceals the underlying processes that in fact account for the world we experience, seeking confirmation in

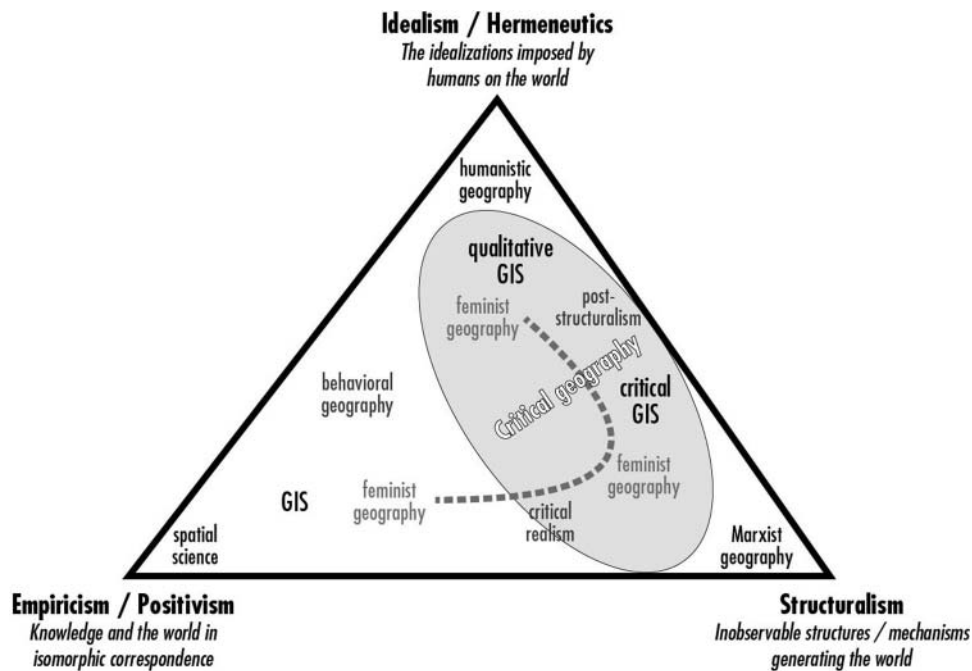


Figure 1. The epistemological triangle. Source: Drawn by Matt Zebrowski, Cartographer, Department of Geography, UCLA.

theoretical coherence rather than empirical correspondence (Dosse and Glassman 1998). Idealism or hermeneutics is founded in the ontological claim that the world humans apperceive is determined by the meaning we give to it, with the consequence that knowledge must be arrived at through processes of interpretation, abstraction, and understanding (rather than explanation).

Other “isms” can be located within this triangle—very possibly occupying zones or even disjoint spaces. Since at least the era of spatial science, geographers have experimented with much of the philosophical space this triangle affords. In the 1960s and 1970s, spatial science, Marxist, and humanist geography self-identified with different poles. In the 1980s, critical realism set up shop in an intermediate position between structuralism and empiricism. Poststructuralism, emphasizing interpretation and representation, is between idealism and structuralism. Feminist geography has followed a trajectory from early empirical work (documenting women’s spaces), to radical feminist geography (second wave feminism, traveling with Marxist approaches), to post-prefixed paradigms (third wave feminism). Geographic information systems (GIS) initially strongly identified with the empirical spatial science pole, only for parts of GIS to move toward the center of the triangle with the emergence of critical GIS (Schuurman 1999, 2001, 2002; Sheppard 2005b).

Different epistemological approaches to knowledge production also entail different methodologies through which knowledge can be assessed for its validity and reliability. In disciplinary discussions we often associate these with different corners of the triangle, as if never the twain should meet, but again actual scholarship repeatedly breaks out of such boxing in. Instead of debating, say, quantitative versus qualitative methods, interpretation versus explanation, or Aristotelian versus dialectical logic, geographical thinking entails making space both for a wide variety of methods (from mathematical modeling of artificial scenarios, through spatial statistics, dialectical analysis, interviews, ethnography, textual and visual analysis, and participatory research, etc.) but also for rigorously thought-out combinations of different methods, as mixed or multi-methods research designs.

In emphasizing this epistemological space rather than boxed “isms,” I am advocating for the possibility of engaging across, rather than having to choose between, ontological, epistemological, and methodological difference. Importantly, this should not be taken to imply that those thinking geographically should converge to some happy median that mixes together a bit of everything: That kind of relativism and eclecticism is likely to be as untenable as it is chaotic. Rather, distinctly positioned scholars, ranged across this space, would advocate passionately for what they are convinced is the best way to produce

knowledge of a particular kind, even as they remain open to learning from others equally passionately positioned elsewhere in the triangle.

### Thinking Geographically, but About What?

The ongoing debate in Anglophone geography, seeking to identify that hard core to be defended against others' imperialist sallies, is whether geography should be defined as the discipline of space (often traced back to Immanuel Kant) or the discipline of human–environment (more recently, nature–society) relations. Avoiding the essentialism and intradisciplinary rivalry provoked by such an either–or debate, thinking geographically implies a both–and attitude.

#### *Spatiotemporality*

The spatial science revolution, more than any moment, forwarded the idea that the heart of geographical thinking is a focus on space. Invoking the idea of morphological laws, it was argued that (human) geographical theory should focus on distance and its impact on the organization of economic activities (Bunge 1966). This was counterposed against a focus on region, with Hartshorne constructed as the scapegoat of a supposedly ideographic account of what he dubbed “areal differentiation” (Hartshorne 1939; Schaeffer 1953)—notwithstanding his own endorsement of a scientific approach (Hartshorne 1959; Luke-rrmann 1989). This created a polarization in geographical thought has stuck with us: between space or distance—the playing field of the new spatial scientists—and place or region—that of humanistic geography. Yet regional geographers and spatial scientists shared a predisposition to conceptualize spatiality (space or place) in Cartesian or Newtonian ways; that is, as independent of the phenomena to be studied. Approaching regions as well-defined territories with characteristic features emphasized absolute location, against which spatial science advanced the idea of relative location. The turn to radical geography challenged spatial science's “spatial fetishism” (Smith 1981), drawing on the philosophical work of Lefebvre to advocate for the idea that spatiality is a product of social processes rather than a given feature of the world, with the geographical task being the conceptualization of how space is produced (Lefebvre [1974] 1991; Smith 1984). But if space is simply the product of social processes, this seemed to evacuate spatiality of any causal power or theoretical significance. Almost

exactly paralleling much earlier debates about environmental determinism, possibilism, and probabilism (or in sociology, between methodological individualism, structuralism, and structuration; Giddens 1984), a consensus emerged around what Soja dubbed the social–spatial dialectic and Harvey equated with Leibnitz's relational space (and Whitehead's relational philosophy). Although spatialities are shaped by societal (indeed by socionatural) processes, those emergent spatialities themselves shape societal (socionatural) processes (Soja 1980; Harvey 1996). This has become a leitmotif among human geographers, taken up also well beyond the discipline under the moniker of socio-spatial theory.

But what is meant by spatiality? Anglophone human geographers have put themselves in somewhat of a forced march from one spatial concept to the next, marked by repeated assertions that the latest concept trumps the previous one, accompanied by amnesia about what has been rejected. In the 1980s, building on a rejection of the supposedly fetishistic focus on distance by spatial scientists, place became the key concept: localities, industrial districts, cities, and the like (cf. Murgatroyd et al. 1985; A. J. Scott 1988; Storper and Walker 1989; Storper and Scott 1993). The early 1990s saw a turn to theorizing the production of geographical scale (e.g., Smith 1992; Brenner 1997; Delaney and Leitner 1997; Marston 2000), rapidly followed by a turn to flattened and self-organized networks or relational space (Murdoch, 1997, 2005). Subsequent calls, in what often feels like a succession of turns of ever-diminishing half-life, have advocated mobility (a spatiotemporal concept), flat ontologies (sites), assemblages, and phase space as alternatives (Sheppard, 2002; Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Cresswell 2006; Jones 2009; Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Other spatialities, emerging from feminist, Antipodean, and postcolonial perspectives, have achieved less traction; for example, paradoxical, partition, or gray space (Rose 1993; Chaturvedi 2003; O'Neill and McGuirk 2005; Yiftachel 2009). Spatiality refers to each of these and more.

Geographical thinking means engaging with the plurality, neither seeking to make any spatiality into the metaconcept nor seeing them as a menu to choose from (cf. Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008). It must be open to a potentially unbounded multiplicity of spatialities, to be deployed in relation to, and intersecting with, one another (Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008). Without such openness, geographical thinking runs the danger of restricting its possibilities. Let me

offer two examples of this. A focus on place, as a bounded and homogeneous unit of analysis, pushes geographical thinking into what Massey (1999, 271) called a geographical imagination that “rearranges spatial differentiation into a temporal sequence.” As I argue later, this has plagued mainstream accounts of globalizing capitalism. A focus on flattened networks and flat ontologies forwards an almost opposite geographical imagination of endless proliferation and volatility, with the future radically uncertain at all points. Such lock-in can be avoided by recognizing how what happens in places is heterogeneously shaped by connectivities extending beyond their boundaries (Massey 1991) and how possibilities of flatness rub up against already existing (previously socionaturally produced) inequalities (Leitner, Pavlik, and Sheppard 2002; Leitner and Miller 2007).

As these two examples suggest, conceptualizations of spatiality also are closely bound up with those of temporality. Geographers should work more, however, to extend their debates on spatiality to the question of spatiotemporality (cf. Willems-Braun 1997; Driver 2003). Philosophical accounts long have stressed the intimate, mutually constitutive relations between space and time. It should follow that those thinking geographically would seek to conceptualize emergent forms of spatiotemporality and their effects, in dialectical relationship with societal (socionatural) processes (cf. May and Thrift 2001). Notwithstanding prominent attempts to open this agenda within the discipline (e.g., Harvey 1990; Thrift 1994; Massey 1999), the long shadow of Kant is evident in a self-imposed disciplinary obsession with space (one that too often marginalizes historical geographical scholarship). Thinking geographically must entail taking historicity seriously, as spatial or geohistory (Carter and Malouf 1989).

### *Radical Intradisciplinarity*

From the early days of *Erdkunde* (Ritter 1818), thinking geographically entailed engaging across phenomena that categorize and separate other disciplines: biological, hydrological, climatic, geological, economic, political, cultural, social processes, and so on. Frank Magilligan and Mona Domosh (personal communication) dub this “radical intradisciplinarity.” This is the greatest potential of geographical thinking but simultaneously the greatest danger to Anglophone geography as a discipline. Those who are skilled in radical intradisciplinarity are supremely positioned to help convene the teams of scholars necessary to take

on some of the most pressing issues facing human society today. At the same time, trends within the discipline undermine this possibility. Among those who think of themselves as human geographers, there has been increasingly rich intradisciplinary engagement across the domains of the social sciences and humanities. Among those who think of themselves as physical geographers, the same intradisciplinary engagement is evident across the earth, life, and climate sciences. There are groups of geographers bridging these clusters: human–environment modelers, political ecologists, cultural theorists of the more-than-human world, and the like. Even among these last groups, however, significant divides persist between those approaching from the physical side and those from the human side. Thus, the most transformative possibility of this aspect of thinking geographically—engaging with the more-than-human world—remains unfulfilled (Lave et al. 2014).

In part, this has epistemological roots: Physical geographers identify with empiricist (and, for some, realist) approaches to knowledge production that have dominated the natural sciences since the early Enlightenment, whereas human geographers tend to identify with postpositivist philosophical approaches. In part, it has to do with different practices of knowledge production. Physical geographers often work in teams, socializing junior scholars through the roles they play in such teams, and publishing many short, multiauthored papers; human geographers tend to work alone, socializing junior scholars to define their own original projects as the basis of their identity, and publishing fewer and longer papers, book chapters, and monographs, with fewer authors (usually one).<sup>1</sup> In part it has to do with distinct external orientations, in terms of approaches to scholarship that geographers aspire to emulate (particular visions of natural science in the case of physical geographers, particular philosophical traditions in the case of human geographers) and where to publish.

Geographical thinking means transcending either–or debates, such as those about whether the approaches of natural science are applicable *ipso facto* to society or whether the study of society requires a radically different approach to that needed to study nature. It also means, of course, deconstructing binary conceptualizations of nature and society, as if they were separable domains of the earth’s surface. Humans inhabit a socionatural, more-than-human world, the hybridity of which cannot be reduced to the study of physical or cultural processes. Biophysical processes



might be increasingly inflected by human society, as invoked in the term Anthropocene, but will always have their own biophysical mechanisms exceeding, and responding to, such influences—often in unexpected ways that reflect nonhuman agency. By the same token, the materiality of human life does not mean that societal dynamics can be reduced to neural signals or genetic inheritance. Fortunately, spaces have emerged for mutual engagement across the divide that the discipline has produced between human and physical geography. For example, the emergence of complexity theory and nonlinear dynamics within the physical sciences has forced a crisis for those who self-identify as logical empiricists (Kellert 1993), creating space for more self-conscious reflection on philosophy and method in physical geography (e.g., Harrison and Dunham 1998; Phillips 1999; Inkpen and Wilson 2013). The turn to nonhuman agency and materiality in cultural geography has created space for taking seriously the knowledge about such processes produced by physical geographers (e.g., Clark 2013). Geographical thinking will need to take up the opportunities created through such openings if it is to achieve its potential—a potential that will draw others to want to emulate what we do, instead of us feeling the need to emulate others.

### Toward Engaged Pluralism

I have argued that the potential of thinking geographically requires taking into account very differently situated knowledge producers, with distinct philosophical and methodological inclinations, specializing in very different substantive topics—each important to how we live in but also shape the world (a point I return to in the Conclusion). Achieving this potential is exceptionally difficult; not only does it require connecting across subfields of our discipline that too often self-identify in terms of their differences from one another but it also requires engaging with the expertise of other disciplines that self-identify as different from geography. Elsewhere, Barnes, Plummer, and I have identified this as the challenge of undertaking engaged pluralism (Sheppard and Plummer 2007; Barnes and Sheppard 2010). Engaged pluralism, “resolving that however much we are committed to our styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other” (Bernstein 1988, 15), is at least as difficult as thinking geographically, but four aspirations can be identified.

### *Self-Critical Open-Mindedness*

During the past twenty years, philosophers of science have repeatedly demonstrated the follies of knowledge production that fails to take into account the variety of positions from which knowledge emerges—of marginalizing differently gendered, raced, and located knowledge producers (e.g., female, non-white, outside the academy, located in global peripheries). Longino (2002) advances normative principles that would make engaged pluralism possible: inclusion of all differently positioned knowledge producers; publicly recognized fora for criticisms of evidence, methods, assumptions, and reasoning; willingness of participants to take criticism from others seriously; adjusting claims in the face of adequate criticism; acknowledging the existence of publicly recognized standards for evaluating knowledge claims; and maintaining equality of intellectual authority among all participants. Importantly, she did not argue that consensus is necessary. Ceaseless, even-handed debate among differently positioned participants, also agreeing to disagree, can produce more reliable knowledge than either enforcing one view over others or resorting to least-common-denominator consensus.

### *Disempowering Preexisting Hierarchies*

The problem, of course, is that such a “round table” engagement between differently positioned participants is continually undermined by already-existing power hierarchies, enabling certain voices to assert greater authority and even hegemony over others. These power hierarchies are shaped by conventions of what counts as science and rigor, by the unequal social power of disciplines, and by knowledge producers’ socio-spatial positionalities. Thus, it is not sufficient to convene Longino’s round table. As Young (2000, 49) put it in a somewhat different context, a pluralist approach must transform “mere exclusion and opposition to the other into engaged antagonism within accepted rules.” Deliberation must be constructed so as to empower those currently marginalized, enabling them to veto decisions if their voices are not adequately heard.

### *Agonistic, Politicized Engagement*

Consensus, or difference, cannot be arrived at through deliberation once power differences are removed. Mouffe (2000) thus advocated for agonistic pluralism—a passionate, no-holds-barred, engaged

pluralism among adversaries. Under agonistic pluralism “the prime task . . . is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, . . . but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs” (16). Such passions always have a political component. Internal to engaged pluralism, this includes strategies deployed to persuade and disempower the other: “The question . . . is not how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion, since this would imply the eradication of the political. . . . [C]reation of a unity in a context of conflict and diversity . . . is always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’” (Mouffe 2000, 15). Externally, there is always at least an implicit politics to knowledge production: It is a fantasy to claim that objective, value-free knowledge can be guaranteed by adhering to “scientific” norms (Sheppard 2014).

Thinking geographically through engaged pluralism furthers diversity but without resorting to the relativism of accepting any viewpoint at face value. Those thinking geographically can and should specialize, also passionately defending their positions in the face of criticism (under conditions as suggested by Longino). It creates potential space for heterogeneity through which anticanonical positionalities and knowledge can be taken seriously (Hong and Ferguson 2011)—a potential that remains far from being realized.

### *Contemplating Many Possible Worlds*

Thinking geographically means creating space to imagine the world as other than the one we have created. As Bernstein (1976, 106) put it, “There has been a lack of critical self-consciousness among mainstream social scientists that the admonition to be ‘realistic,’ to study the way things are, is not so much a scientific imperative as a dubious moral imperative that has pernicious consequences in limiting human imagination and political and social possibilities.”

## Thinking Geographically About Globalizing Capitalism

In common parlance, capitalism references the currently taken-for-granted way that economic activities are, and should be, organized worldwide. The activities gathered under this term are inherently geographical, yet geographers have limited influence over how capitalism is understood. Indeed, the very area of the discipline that we think of as specializing in understanding

capitalism, economic geography, is up for grabs: It is in danger of being appropriated by mainstream economists. There is much at stake here, for both geography and the world. Among geographers, there is an ongoing, intense debate about the consequences of this appropriation. Is it a sign that geography is finally coming of age or that we are selling our birthright for a mess of pottage? For the world, there is the prospect that thinking geographically offers a less sanguine perspective on capitalism than the hagiographic accounts dominating contemporary academic and public discourse.

Discourses about and conceptions of capitalism seem, on the face of it, straightforward. To summarize the commonsense position, capitalism is a way of organizing economic activities in society, one that emerged in Europe to replace previously existing, undesirable systems (notably feudalism and slavery). Capitalism entails the production of goods as *commodities*, driven by the expectation of making a profit by selling them to consumers; the existence of more-or-less autonomous *competitive markets* (free trade), where producers and consumers meet to set prices for the exchange of commodities; *labor markets*, through which individuals sell their labor as a commodity to employers in exchange for wages and salaries; *innovation and entrepreneurship*, whereby those selling commodities develop new products and production methods to gain competitive advantage and windfall profits; and *democracy*, by means of which political decisions are driven by the desires and preferences of individual producers and consumers, in a pluralist competition for political influence. Beyond this, the commonsense position is that capitalism is economically and politically superior to its predecessors. In this view, capitalism has globalized from Europe around the world, a way of organizing economies at all geographical scales that is capable of bringing prosperity to all who adopt its principles (Rostow 1960; Sachs 2005).

Thinking geographically about globalizing capitalism raises a series of profound questions about this commonsense, creating space to consider possible alternatives. Attention to the geography of how we have come to know capitalism—unpacking its more-than-European origins and influences—raises questions not only about where capitalism was born (Blaut 1976) and how it became hegemonic but also about how we conceptualize it. Further, attention to the complicated spatiotemporalities of capitalism as we know it and to how economic processes coevolve with

political, cultural, social, and biophysical processes undermines the economic parable that the invisible hand of capitalism is essential to eliminating poverty and realizing sustainability.

### How Capitalism Became European

Conceptions of capitalism remain grounded in the- orizations developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, particularly in Scotland and England, whose Enlightenment philosophers sought to explain how society could be organized according to secular principles rather than religious doctrine. Key building blocks were the idea of individual liberty, grounded in property ownership (John Locke); the invisible hand, whereby markets would ensure that the self-interested actions of producers and consumers redound to the common good (Adam Smith); and free trade to realize the potential of this invisible hand (David Ricardo). Pluralist democracy was seen as an essential addendum to this economic model, by ensuring that the state reflects the collective expression of the desires of free, enfranchised individuals, who would act to limit its ability to interfere with individual liberty and thereby the invisible hand. Even in Europe, of course, these ideals were profoundly distorted by racial, gendered, and class hierarchies shaping who was accorded the right to individual freedom and political influence. As Europeans brought this thinking to the rest of the world through colonialism, the conceptions they carried with them concerning who should be accorded such rights systematically excluded the bulk of non-European peoples (Muthu 2003; Goldberg 2006).

These thinkers, committed to empiricism and living when and where they did—with little if any direct experience of the non-European world—took for granted that the capitalism they experienced, named, and conceptualized was endogenous to the societies they lived in. In a certain way, they invented capitalism in the image of Europe. Indeed, to this day it is conventional to present capitalism as it took form in Europe as the norm or ideal type, narrating its rise to influence there and its diffusion to the rest of the world. I call these kinds of explanations place-based accounts. Here features of the region we call Europe are called forth to explain the remarkable flourishing of industrial capitalism in Europe. Depending on the thinker, these features have included religion (Weber [1902] 2003), climate (Semple 1911; Huntington 1922; Sachs 2001), topography, culture, the Westphalian nation-state system,

democracy, and individualism. These are, literally, Eurocentric explanations of Europe's economic success (Blaut 2000). From such self-conceptions, it proved a short step to the belief that Europe embodied a dynamism and success—indeed, civilization—that was absent outside the zones of European settlement (Said 1978, 1994). Thus, “the white man's burden” (Kipling 1899) became enlightening the rest of the world by evangelizing European norms and practices, no matter the personal cost. For example, the great European liberal philosopher James Mill, an employee of the India House in London (but never in India), classified south Asians as not (yet) civilized and thus not to be accorded the rights of personal liberty without the sticks and carrots of European tutelage—with the sticks particularly in evidence (Lindqvist 1992).

There were also vital debates, of course, among European thinkers about the nature and merits of capitalism. Whereas Adam Smith (in his more optimistic moments), David Ricardo, and the bulk of British political economists pushed free trade, pursued by Britain after 1846, Alexander Hamilton in the United States and Friedrich List in Germany successfully advocated for state intervention to protect infant domestic industries from the rigors of British competition (enabling catch-up industrialization). Debates about the role of a capitalist state remain framed by these poles. That unwanted, anti-empiricist German immigrant to Britain, Karl Marx, acknowledging capitalism's economic and political benefits relative to preexisting systems, nevertheless argued that capitalism is itself exploitative and plagued by internal contradictions that might well prove fatal. Such disagreements about how to implement capitalism, its long-term consequences, and sustainability occurred within a shared worldview that capitalism's ideal-typical features could be deduced from its European manifestation.<sup>2</sup> Thinking geographically raises questions about this presumption, however.

In fact, many of the economic practices gathered conceptually under the label of capitalism (a term coined in mid-nineteenth-century England) long had preexisted Europe's capitalist industrial revolution, in distant parts of the world. In the thirteenth century, when European travelers were stunned by the sophistication and prosperity of Asian empires and cities, the production and long-distance trade of commodities could be found throughout Asia and Africa—scattered across settlements that had come to constitute the nodes in rich trading networks traversing the Indian Ocean, into the China Sea (Abu-Lughod 1991; Blaut 1993). A detailed genealogy of these incipient

capitalist practices remains to be developed, but we cannot assume that these undoubtedly variegated practices conformed with, or circulated around the ideal type of, capitalism as it came to be known in Europe. Rather, as Europe materially and discursively became the center of calculation of capitalism, the form that capitalism took in Europe came to be the referent against which related practices in other places and times were judged as to whether they could be called capitalist. As Europe gained hegemony, its local version of capitalism became global.

Beyond this, Europe's industrial capitalist revolution, led by England, also cannot simply be explained in place-based terms. Marx referred to how England used its colonial power to undermine a sophisticated south Asian cotton textile and clothing industry, which was producing goods much in demand by European elites in the eighteenth century, through a set of mercantile practices that enabled the Manchester region to explode onto the global scene as the so-called workshop of the world. This relegated south Asia to raw cotton production (Marx 1853). Extensive subsequent historical research has documented this process, more nuanced than Marx implied but with the result he suggested (e.g., Ray 2011). Indeed, the eighteenth century was a period of deindustrialization in Asia and Latin America, catalyzed by external forces (Bairoch 1993; Williamson 2006). Historians and geographers have identified a broad range of processes by means of which European colonialism facilitated its industrial revolution, ranging from the provision of cheap resources and food, to gold and silver, agricultural and industrial technologies, and slavery and the factory system (Blaut 1993; Frank 1998; Hobson 2004; Baucom 2005; Johnson 2013; Beckert 2014). Gathering these findings together, it is fair to conclude that the uneven connectivities produced through colonialism greatly benefited a continent whose relatively favorable location with respect to the "new world" offered a positional advantage that colonialism profoundly reinforced (much helped by China's abandonment of naval exploration in 1424). I call this a connectivity-based explanation.

By the time the industrial revolution took off, then, England and Europe's other colonial powers had already positioned themselves for success as a result of the uneven connectivities of colonialism. Eighteenth-century European political economists represented the capitalism emerging there, no doubt a hybrid of local and imported characteristics, as autochthonous, and as a point through which economic development everywhere had to pass. For example, having manipulated

itself into a position whereby its industry could prosper, reorienting south Asia from manufacturing to raw material production, England adopted the free trade doctrine (in 1846, with Corn Law reform), presenting this as a universal law of mutually beneficial economic development on the basis of specialization and trade. Importantly, this move was not rationalized by Ricardo's recently published theory of comparative advantage, the foundation for international trade theory to the present day. It was the result of a political lobby led by Manchester cotton manufacturers, the Anti-Corn Law League, that shared with the Chartist labor movement a desire to lower the cost of bread. Ricardo's theory, likely developed to rationalize an already existing intellectual consensus favoring free trade, was not deployed by the League; its basis in class analysis was seen as too controversial (Sheppard 2005a; Trentmann 2008). The practice of free trade was profoundly to British advantage, inducing Germany and the United States to introduce the protectionist boundaries referred to earlier to shelter their economies. Britain abandoned free trade when it became clearly disadvantageous, during the Great Depression, but the United States became a free-trade nation at Bretton Woods. This was a moment when free trade enabled the postwar U.S. industrial economy to take advantage of the country's emergent positionality as the dominant geo-economic power in a world whose decolonization it helped accelerate.

As this example of free trade demonstrates, locally advantageous practices could be justified on the basis of supposedly universal laws of economics (Longino's monist knowledge), rooted in a particular theorization of capitalism that acted to justify its superiority. Indeed, this version of economic theory helped make the world in its own image (Mitchell 2005), one that takes for granted that the world should be organized around European and North American style capitalism. This monism has been achieved, however, by disguising its own geographical specificities, making invisible its ongoing indebtedness to a European worldview. Geographical thinking has the potential to disrupt this understanding, not only by revealing its locatedness but also by disrupting its internal logic.

### How Geographical Thinking Disrupts Mainstream Accounts of Globalizing Capitalism

Genuine refutation must penetrate the power of the opponent and meet him [sic] on the ground of his

strength; the case is not won by attacking him somewhere else and defeating him where he is not. (Adorno [1970] 1982, 14, quoting Hegel [1841] 1998, 581)

Here, I want to set aside the possibility that European-style capitalism might not be the norm that it seems, to discuss how that norm is conceptualized. Mainstream theories of globalizing capitalism have been rooted in neoclassical economic theory since the marginalists' rejection of Marx's theory in late nineteenth-century England. As British economists became increasingly critical of mainstream accounts, these theories migrated to U.S. universities in the second half of the twentieth century, to Harvard and MIT in their more Keynesian manifestations (Harcourt 1972), and subsequently to the University of Chicago as Keynesianism ceded ground to Hayekian market-led (neoliberal) discourses (Peck 2010). In the limited space available to me here, I can do little more than summarize some salient ways in which geographical thinking is disruptive, in the form of six propositions that have emerged from scholarship that takes the geography of capitalism seriously.<sup>3</sup>

*Proposition 1: Capitalism's Spatiality Disrupts the Ideal of Market Equilibrium*

For mainstream economics, perfectly competitive market equilibrium is the holy grail, justifying Adam Smith's invisible hand: In an institutional context in which all economic actors are powerless price-takers (perfect competition), freely operating markets converge on a market equilibrium of commodity exchange. Supply matches demand, realizing rational but also socially appropriate prices. The Krugman revolution in geographical economics extended such market-clearing, microfoundational and zero-profit scenarios to the case of monopolistic competition in space (Krugman, 1991, 1995, 1996). Like his forebear Lösch ([1940] 1954), this enabled Krugman to explain morphogenesis—the emergence of spatial order (central place hierarchies, agglomerations) from geographical uniformity.

Yet this imaginary fails when the spatiality of capitalism is taken seriously. It has long been known that Lösch's spatial version of perfect competition is disrupted by spatial monopolies (Denike and Parr 1970; Sheppard and Curry 1982). More generally, Starrett (1978) proved what has been dubbed the spatial impossibility theorem: "If space is homogeneous, transport is costly and preferences are locally nonsaturated, then there is no competitive equilibrium

involving transportation" (Ottaviano and Thisse 2004, 2571). With respect to Krugman's modification, Fowler (2007, 2011) demonstrated that convergence on market equilibrium is unlikely in a spatially differentiated economy. Further, in the real world of already-existing spatial differentiation (some firms more locationally advantaged than others) and limited spatial information, it is not rational for firms to maximize total profits as mainstream theory presumes. They should seek to maximize rates of profit on capital advanced, and any emergent spatial price equilibria are at best quasi-stable (Sheppard, Haining, and Plummer 1992; Plummer, Sheppard, and Haining 2012).

*Proposition 2: The Spatiotemporal Production and Circulation of Commodities Is Productive of Sociospatial Inequality (Uneven Geographical Development) and Conflict*

Economic geographers, following nineteenth-century political economy, prefer to begin with production rather than the market. It is at the moment of commodity production when economic processes confront the materiality of the world. Production involves the metamorphosis of nonhuman entities, shaped by biophysical processes, into commodities for human consumption. This is also the moment when the human body, marked by sociocultural difference, is thrown into this metamorphosis—albeit in the politically unequal context of the workplace:

[T]he money-owner now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labor-power follows as his laborer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding. (Marx [1867] 1967, 176)

Thus, the moment of commodity production is simultaneously material and political. Yet it is also a moment when many of the commodities produced are not intended for immediate human consumption (wage goods) but for the production of other commodities (capital goods; Sraffa 1960). In current geographical parlance, this means conceiving of the economy *relationally*—in terms of how commodity production connects firms with one another across time and space, not just with consumers (as in the bulk of geographical economics).

Commodity production necessarily extends across time and space. It is temporal, because capital must be

advanced prior to production to purchase inputs, with any profits only realized after the production process has been completed, the commodity brought to market and sold, and the revenues returned to the capitalist (the turnover time for the capital invested). Its spatiality has two aspects. First, commodities have to be moved from one place to another to complete the production process (including sales). More fundamentally, spatiality itself is produced. The commodity of accessibility, produced by transportation and communications firms, is necessary to the functioning of a spatially extensive relational economy. Indeed, improving accessibility is the key to reducing turnover time, enhancing economic productivity and growth—as can be seen in the huge public and private investments into this sector.<sup>4</sup> This latter aspect of spatiality has not been internalized into mainstream accounts of globalizing capitalism yet has the potential to significantly disrupt mainstream hagiographic accounts.<sup>5</sup>

First, the accessibility commodity makes it less likely that capitalists' profit-seeking actions realize their intended goals. Profit-enhancing technologies, and decisions about what to produce and where, might reduce average profit rates. Put more abstractly, capitalism's emergent spatiotemporalities increase the likelihood that individual capitalists' profit-enhancing strategies backfire, undermining the possibility of harmonious equilibrium. Computational experiments confirm that models built on these principles could result in ongoing nonlinear disequilibrium dynamics and uneven geographical development (Bergmann, Sheppard, and Plummer 2009; Bergmann 2012).

Second, conflicts associated with the politics of production underlie such unharmonious, uneven spatial dynamics of commodity production. Actions taken by workers to advance their wages are tendentially opposed to those of capitalists seeking to improve profit rates (further complicated if we include landlords, resource owners, and land and resource rents). At scales ranging from places of production to regional and national territories, such conflicts of interest destabilize any economic equilibria that happen to be achieved. Given unequal power hierarchies, beginning with that in the workplace, spatiotemporal moments when workers' influence exceeds that of capitalists are rare. Indeed, the power of capitalists seems particularly evident at present. Yet workers' individual and collective strategies remain capable of reshaping the spatial dynamics of globalizing capitalism (Herod 2001).

Thinking geographically, the usual optic through which such conflicts of interest are read, that of

conflicts between economic classes, is simplistic. Not only do capitalists' unintended consequences undermine the advancement of their individual and collective interests and identity, but the same also can be true for workers. Workers' immediate interests in some places might be in conflict with those of workers located elsewhere; those of unskilled workers might conflict with those of skilled and administrative workers; and those of workers as producers might conflict with those of working families as consumers. Differences in gender, race, and other intersectional aspects of identity and subjectivity further complicate such processes. With the economic landscape itself constantly shifting, it becomes all but impossible to forecast the outcomes of such multilayered, emergent conflicts and coalitions. There is a leitmotif, however: Globalizing capitalism (re)produces sociospatial inequalities. This is far from a deterministic process, as at times power hierarchies are disrupted, but harmonious equilibrium cannot be the order of the day.

*Proposition 3: Geographies of Politics and Governance  
Coevolve with Those of Globalizing Capitalism*

The destabilizing, nonharmonious nature of a capitalist space-economy implies that politics cannot be evacuated from accounts of globalizing capitalism, unlike the tendency in mainstream accounts (also in geographical political economy; Agnew 2012). After the failure of the Washington Consensus even the most hardened proponents of neoliberalism were forced to acknowledge that markets are not self-organizing (Sheppard and Leitner 2010). In international political economy, uneven geographies of state governance are conceptualized around the notion of varieties of capitalism, describing a spectrum stretching from the nightwatchman or free market state to the interventionist or corporatist state (each rooted in European ideal types). Thinking geographically characterizes state governance, however, as ongoing experimentation with variegated versions of these but also other models (e.g., developmentalist states, one-party states), across time and region but also geographical scale, seeking to illuminate the variegations that emerge in particular spatiotemporal contexts (Tickell and Peck 1992; Peck and Theodore 2007). This is further complicated by broader geopolitical agendas, by the attempts of powerful states to align others with their vision of capitalism and by policy mobility (Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Dittmer and Sharp 2014; Peck and Theodore 2015). In the process, the

conventional focus on territories and scales becomes complicated by other spatialities: networks, uneven connectivities, and mobility.

Yet other modalities of governance and rule exceed the realm of formal politics. These include multilateral organizations' supranational and subnational agendas, corporate governance, geo-economic strategies of firms and territories (and their confluence in international trade and investment agreements), and lobbying and political influence. Last, but by no means least, is the political domain of civil society—actions that range from democratic political strategies to social movements, contentious politics, and everyday “weapons of the weak” (J. C. Scott 1985; Leitner et al. 2007; Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008).

*Proposition 4: Biophysical and Sociocultural Processes Exceed and Shape Globalizing Capitalism, Notwithstanding Attempts to Enroll Them into Market Logics*

Mainstream accounts of globalizing capitalism conceptualize humans and the more-than-human world as fixed characteristics, exogenous to the economy. The nonhuman world is conceptualized as fixed bundles of “natural resources,” to be traded like any produced commodity. The environment more broadly is reduced to particular attributes collectively labeled geography (e.g., temperature, tropicality, navigable waterways), again taken to be exogenous background conditions. An external and fixed physical geography shapes globalizing capitalism, redolent of environmental determinism (Sachs 2000). Mainstream accounts also increasingly examine the environmental implications of economic choices, conceived as extramarket externalities, that need to be priced or taxed to facilitate ecological sustainability. Missing here, however, is any conception of the role of nonhuman agency (biophysical processes, etc.): Its coconstitutive, dialectical relationships with economic processes are simply assumed away.

Thinking geographically, the more-than-human world is continually in the making, evolving through distinct and heterogeneous coevolutionary dynamics connecting humans with the world we inhabit. These dynamics, irreducible to economic processes, shape the nature, spatiotemporality, and future possibilities of Earth. Resources are not just “out there”: They need to be identified, constituted as resources through processes that reflect societal conditions and the materiality of the objects in question, and then commodified. Yet nonhuman agency also can

contest the conditions necessary for commodifying the more-than-human world, limiting the degree to which it can be entrained into the economy as resources. Evolutionary accounts of capitalism, channeling the Darwinian thinking that attracted Adam Smith, equate capitalist competition with biological survival of the fittest in a fixed environment (Hodgson 2002; Essletzbichler and Rigby 2010). But things become a lot more complicated once we recognize that this environment is (re)produced through socionatural processes. Fitness itself becomes an emergent feature of these dynamics, with highly unpredictable consequences for human action (Norgaard 1994; Martin and Sunley 2014). With respect to the impact of economic processes on the more-than-human world, mainstream accounts blithely presume that capitalist markets and states (e.g., carbon trading and taxes) can create an ecologically sustainable globalizing capitalism, and Marxist critiques espouse the opposite—a quasi-Malthusian crisis as capitalist accumulation runs up against natural limits (O'Connor 1991). Yet geographical reality is far more complex than either scenario. Globalizing capitalism seeks to manage a more-than-human world with complex geographically differentiated dynamics that consistently exceed such attempts (e.g., anthropocentric climate change).

In short, the “intricate interweavings of situated people, artifacts, codes, and living things and the maintenance of particular tapestries of connection across the world” (Whatmore and Thorne 1997, 288), bringing into existence heterogenous assemblages that vary, and connect, across space and time, are unstable, complex, fragile, and unpredictable (DeLanda 2006). The future is inherently uncertain, and current trajectories should be assessed for their environmental justice and justice-to-nature implications (Low and Gleeson 1998).

With respect to humans, mainstream accounts represent the macroscale spatial dynamics of globalizing capitalism as the aggregate result of quasi-rational, self-interested choices by quasi-autonomous individuals, each parameterized by fixed preferences and endowments. From this perspective, humans come to be judged in terms of their capacity or willingness to act appropriately: Are they entrepreneurial, risk-taking, and responsible? If not, and if they also resist conditions designed to encourage appropriate behavior (“libertarian paternalism”; Thaler and Sunstein 2003), then they have only themselves to blame for any

negative consequences. Furthermore, societal difference conventionally is collapsed into a single representative agent (Kirman 1992).

Thinking geographically fundamentally calls into question such considerations, however. Society is not composed of quasi-autonomous, economic individuals: Preferences and endowments—noting the simplistic nature of this model of behavior—are shaped by a variety of cultural, political, and economic processes (e.g., discourses and cultural norms, policies, advertising). Three aspects of this come to the fore: heterogeneity (bodies as objects), positionality and intersectionality (connectivities linking bodies), and structure–agency relations (interscalar relations). First, neither the neoclassical possessive individual nor the structural Marxian class subject suffices to capture the heterogeneity and behavior of human economic agents. A generation of feminist and cultural geographers, among many others, have stressed the heterogeneity of human actors, along lines of difference that include gender, race, sexuality, and physical ability but also geographical location, emphasizing that this heterogeneity is not reducible to representative agents, preferences, or class identity.

Second, this heterogeneity is not reducible to such individual attributes as preferences and class identity. Actors' variegated, differentially empowered identities, worldviews, and actions are not preformed but reflect their sociospatial positionality, including the complexity of how these various social attributes come together in particular people and places—intersectionality (Valentine 2007; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). As noted earlier, positionality and intersectionality emerge relationally, although the uneven and shifting social relations connecting individuals' sociospatial positionalities also are generative of complex sociospatial dynamics of collaboration, cooptation, alliance politics, oppression and exploitation, and competition. Some of these enroll subjects in behavior conforming to, and performing, mainstream conceptions of competition and rational choice. Others contest and exceed those norms through such actions as consumer activism, collective resistance, and contestation—some in response to the inequalities and injustices associated with globalizing capitalism, others simply reproducing long-standing traditions of living differently (inflected by their relations to globalizing capitalism).

Third, these interrelations between human agents are embedded in broader processes—larger scale

discourses and practices that download norms and power relations to the scale of the body, even as they also are subject to manipulation from the scale of the body. These broader processes include class relations—the argument that elite interests and practices shape and constrain those of the social majority. But they also include gender norms, racial formations, and expectations about sexuality and (dis)ability (e.g., patriarchy, white privilege, heteronormativity; Omi and Winant [1994] 2014; Gleeson 1999; Browne, Lim, and Brown 2009; Hong 2011; Bonds 2013; Kobayashi 2014). These deeply affect the unequal conditions of possibility for human agency across social and spatial location, thereby also shaping social inequality and uneven geographical development.

*Proposition 5: Uneven Geographical Development Undermines Developmentalist Discourses and Imaginaries*

In mainstream accounts of globalizing capitalism, it is commonplace to argue that a territory's developmental possibilities depend on its place-based characteristics—culture, governance, and physical geography (climate, access to navigable water, topography, resource endowments). Causality runs from place-based characteristics to economic outcomes: reducing geographical thinking to methodological territorialism (Agnew 1994; Brenner 2004). Under the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, nation-states in the postcolony were enjoined to alter their internal rules and institutions to conform with a certain (free market) representation of the conditions prevailing in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. This was presented as a necessary and sufficient condition for replicating the economic performance of those countries (implying convergence to spatial economic equilibrium). This particular “best practice” model of economic development lost popularity after the 1997 Asian financial crisis triggered a shift toward a “post-Washington consensus” around “good” governance and poverty reduction, but a place-based imaginary persists under the latter (Sheppard and Leitner 2010).

At the international scale, there has been a remarkable recent flourishing of empirical historical economic research, adding a great deal of nuance to our understanding of globalizing capitalism and its relationship to sociospatial inequality (e.g., Milanovic 2005; Williamson 2005; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Hausmann and Hidalgo 2014; Piketty 2014). Here, also, place-based thinking



predominates. It is argued that the negative consequences of colonialism are due to poor governance imposed by colonial authorities, that income and wealth inequality is a result of slow territorial growth rates, and that international inequality is due to place-based differences in political institutions, physical geography, or cultural diversity and conflict (Sachs 2005; Collier 2007). In terms of connectivities, broad-scale shifts in the global geography of development are ascribed to equilibrating responses to falling transport costs worldwide (Baldwin 2006; Williamson 2011). It also is presumed that such connectivities will be mutually beneficial in free market capitalism, as in the free trade doctrine, implying that connectivities are not a significant cause of geographical inequality (Sheppard 2012).

Also at the subnational scale, Storper (1997a) argued that cities or regions need to assemble the right mix of place-based relational assets to prosper in the face of the centrifugal forces of globalizing capitalism. For some critics of the World Bank's (2009) *Reshaping Economic Geography* report, for its overly simplistic and optimistic analysis of how capitalism eventually reduces inequality, place-based approaches remain the key to the wealth and poverty of places—whether this be about attracting the “creative class” or attending to the differentiated possibilities of different bundles of regional characteristics (Florida 2002; Barca, McCann, and Rodriguez-Pose 2012; Storper 2013). This is because places find themselves within an undifferentiated space of flows—a “pure flow economy” (Storper 1997b, 28) or field of transactions of “unlimited geographical range” (A. J. Scott 2000, 88)—with the implication that interregional or interurban connectivities are far less crucial than local networking and other agglomeration economies (A. J. Scott and Storper 2015). In this view, extraplace connectivities might also matter but largely in mutually beneficial ways: “Trade enables cities to specialize and sell their outputs in exchange for the specialized outputs of other places. The economic viability of cities and the growth of long-distance trade are therefore complementary and mutually reinforcing phenomena” (A. J. Scott and Storper 2015, 7). Here, too, place-based thinking is prioritized. Place characteristics are argued to determine comparative or competitive advantage: If these are correctly identified as the basis for specialization and trade, then all places can equally benefit.

Thinking geographically pushes beyond such place-based imaginaries to pay serious attention to the

possibility that geographical outcomes and place-based characteristics are shaped by the uneven connectivities linking nations, regions, cities, and communities (cf. Massey 1991). Methodological territorialism imagines regions as quasi-autonomous spatial units of analysis, with interconnectivities, to the degree that they matter at all, that tend to reduce rather than enhance inequalities. This imaginary “rearranges spatial differences into temporal sequence” (Massey 1999, 271), aligning regions into a single developmental trajectory—dubbed stages of economic growth in Rostow's (1960) anticommunist manifesto. Here, differences between places are reduced to temporality—to how far they have advanced along a trajectory spearheaded by the North Atlantic capitalist economies.

Yet there is abundant empirical evidence and theoretical analysis calling this imaginary into question. The connectivities between places are often uneven, reinforcing rather than mitigating geographical inequality (within and between places). Further, even as communications costs fall, unevenly and with reversals, inequalities in relative locational advantage—between central and peripheral places—are not melting away into a flattened world. For example, Lewis (2014) describes the lengths high-frequency traders go to, and the costs they are willing to incur, to reduce their spatiotemporal distance between their servers and the New York Stock Exchange by a few milliseconds (in the process, dramatically reshaping the geography of global finance). Finally, the imaginary that poor regions are simply backward and will advance to converge on the core as a result of globalizing capitalism has been unable to deliver on this promise, notwithstanding changing beliefs about the form of capitalism (ranging from state-led to free-market) that will enable this (Kuznets 1955; Piketty 2014).

Thinking geographically about globalizing capitalism, attending to both its coconstitution with various spatialities and the entanglements of economic with more-than-human and cultural-political phenomena and processes, enables us to understand why connectivities tend to reproduce unevenness and inequality. As some places rapidly prosper, others fall back. Globalizing capitalism thus is generative of sociospatial inequality (uneven geographical development), making it insufficient to guarantee equal livelihood chances for all, everywhere. Just as our individual possibilities do not simply depend on our characteristics but on interrelations with differently positioned others, so the possibilities that territories face also depend on their uneven connectivities and positionalities.

*Proposition 6: Alternatives Are Ever-Present and Necessary*

Thinking (or unthinking) geographically about globalizing capitalism has uncovered abundant evidence of a wide variety of forms of economic life that resist, exceed, or simply are tangential to commodity production and market exchange, not only in supposedly traditional or less developed societies but also close to the heartbeat of globalizing capitalism (in such “global” cities as London or New York; e.g., Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Lee 2006; Leitner et al. 2007; Benjamin 2008; Roy 2009; Simone 2010; Massey 2011). Given globalizing capitalism’s tendency to reproduce sociospatial inequality, failing to deliver on its promise, such alternatives should no longer be regarded as residual practices, withering away naturally in the shadow of capitalism’s inexorable developmental trajectory. They are a valuable and diverse experimental ecosystem of norms, practices, and trajectories—the seed banks, if you will, of alternatives to globalizing capitalism.

### Geographical Thinking’s Disruptive Potential

As envisioned here, geographical thinking has the potential to cut across conventional categories of knowledge production—not only those categorized into separate disciplines in academic institutions but also the social and spatial locations (in and beyond the academy) where knowledge is produced every day. At its best, geographical thinking provides a vital, greatly underappreciated perspective on the most pressing problems besetting Earth.

My case study has been globalizing capitalism. From the perspective of mainstream social science disciplines, the proponents of which are situated within the Global North, globalizing capitalism is invented in Europe, from where it diffuses around the world. As it metastasizes, it carries with it the potential for every place and person to achieve lifestyles parallel to those in the North Atlantic realm, on condition that places and people conform to its expectations. In this hagiographic account, largely taken for granted as reliable knowledge today, impoverishment is overwhelmingly attributed to place-based and individual attributes: to places’ failure to move up the development ladder and their residents’ failures to adequately adopt the ways of capitalism.

Thinking geographically, such an account is profoundly disrupted. Recalling the local, interested origins of what has come to be seen as ubiquitous pushes us to provincialize what we take for granted about capitalism. It means querying conventional presumptions and narrations about who is developed where, what counts as development, and how this was achieved. Attending to uneven global connectivities, it becomes clear that Europe’s emergence as the global center of capitalism by the nineteenth century was due to geographical circumstance, not just European nous. These connectivities further unravel how Europe’s capitalist industrial revolution has been underwritten by the brutalities of colonialism and slavery, at the expense of Africa, Asia, and other colonized territories. As globalizing capitalism spread to the rest of the world, under such labels as development and the market, thinking geographically also helps us appreciate why prosperity has not diffused in its wake (Blaut 1987, 1993). The shifting, endogenous spatiotemporalities of capitalism undermine the rationality of self-interested behavior. The dynamics of uneven geographical development reveal how globalizing capitalism remains haunted by conflict and instability: generative of, rather than countermanding, sociospatial poverty and inequality (Hart 2002). The entanglements of economic with other socionatural processes undermine the self-sufficiency capacity of globalizing capitalism to entrain Earth in its vision.

If thinking geographically reveals inherent problems with globalizing capitalism, it also promotes skepticism about off-the-shelf answers. A common response is to seek a global alternative, an antithesis of globalizing capitalism, waiting in the wings to be anointed as the better alternative. In a geographically differentiated world, there is little reason to believe in cookie-cutter solutions. Instead of invoking another “ism,” we must attend to the multiple, variegated assemblages of more-than-capitalist practices already being experimented with, in and across all kinds of places. Thinking geographically thus means interrogating any alternative but without resorting to the celebration of local knowledge, to letting a thousand flowers bloom. In the spirit of engaged pluralism, these various experiments must be critically assessed from others’ perspectives, seeking excellence through learning across sociospatial diversity. Of course, such assessments must be inflected with moral norms and ethical commitments—I advocate for emancipation not exploitation, collaboration over competition, commons rather than privatization, and radical democracy challenging the rule of experts.

Globalizing capitalism is just one example, however—one familiar to me. Beyond this, I am convinced that thinking geographically is potentially disruptive of all kinds of conventional understandings of Earth stalking us today. But the qualifier matters. Achieving this potential can only be enormously challenging and difficult. Diversity carries with it the potential for excellence, but beware the trapdoors of disagreement, destructive critique, competition, careerism, and self-absorption that too often shape our academic practices.

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## Notes

1. The design of the 2006 National Research Council ranking system for graduate programs has done a great disservice to geography by adopting the publication culture of the natural sciences as the norm against which geographical research is to be judged. ISI-based citation counts, impact factors, and h-scores are similarly insidious.
2. Even the most trenchant critics of globalizing capitalism's deleterious impact on postcolonial Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia (e.g., Amin 1974; Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1979; Blaut 1993; Arrighi 2010) largely work within this European definition of capitalism and capitalist development (cf. Escobar 1995).
3. For further discussion, see Sheppard (forthcoming).
4. Geographical thinking about transportation, communications, cyberspace, and logistics remains a neglected area of scholarship.
5. Financial instruments also are commodities in this sense, easing the reciprocal flows of money to pay for other traded commodities. Their geographies are equally worthy of considerable attention, particularly in this era of financialization.

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