

Comedia Geographica

On the subjectivity and objectivity of subject and object in human geographical research.

An absurd one-act play

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First performance: 7th May 1986 at the Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers in Minneapolis/St Paul.

Characters:

Actors	Audience
Stranger (Charlie)	
Vladimir (Didi)	
Voice	Noi Tazilaicos

Scene: Afternoon. A conference room. Functional cosiness An empty row of seats faces a row of seats occupied by the audience. A window on the side of the room, a bare white wall on the other side with an overhead projector directed towards it.

Stranger (*Standing at the wall, in his hand a file*)

Vladimir (*Enters, walks to the empty front row, looks around, and sits down facing the audience, waits for quite a long time, seems disoriented, gets up and turns to the stranger*) Good afternoon. Excuse me Sir ... my name is Vladimir ... do you know ... (*The Stranger does not seem very interested*) I thought they were going to show a geographical comedy here in this room ...

Stranger (*Slowly, absent-minded*) Vladimir? (*Looks at a form he has taken out of the file*) You are Vladimir?

Vladimir Yes, but you can call me Didi if you want. I had an Irish grandfather ...

Stranger Psst! You are disturbing the play! (*Turns to the audience*)

Vladimir (*Looks around, shakes her head and walks back to her seat*) Some say that one has to look carefully and what one cannot see does not exist. Others say that what is going on is completely irrelevant as long as we agree on a common version. I don't think that either possibility would help us! (*To herself*) Seems to live in a different world. I am quite sure that the beginning of this geographical comedy was scheduled for 1 pm here in this room. Well, maybe I am too early. (*Waits, takes out a book and reads aloud*) Where did I stop? Oh, yes ... "Export exogenous substance. Hurry! S opens the file, takes out a stapler, fastens V's arms on her back, fixes V's mouth closed, and pushes her towards the door. V obeys (*turns the page*) without resistance, looks back and leaves." (*Closes her book laughs*) Obeys without resistance. Not bad. Resistance would only confirm his power. At least she really tried and having done this she may well go and look for a different place to start anew.

Stranger (*Clears his throat*)

Vladimir (*Looks up and notices the audience in front of her*) Oh, here they are. A play with so many actors!? An actorial agglomeration! (*Counts, stops, looks aside*) But I seem to be the only person interested in it. I guess it's bad anyway. (*Puts away the book and straightens up, waiting full of expectation*) Why don't they say anything? They just keep looking at me! (*To the audience/actors*) Yes, I am sorry, I am the only spectator. I don't believe anybody else will come, sorry, but I think you can start. Every provocation has its time. (*Waits, watching the*

audience/actors, stands up) Is this meant to be their performance? Men in a room. Maybe this is Geography. But a comedy? *(Waits)* That's ridiculous, *(laughs)* the actors are quiet, the spectator talks. *(Laughs)* It must be true, we laugh when we discover contradiction. This, by the way, distinguishes laughter from pleasure.... I think I lost my way. What am I doing here? ... Am I the spectator or the actor? *(Standing in front of a spectator/actor)* God, couldn't you say anything to set the order of things here? ... No, don't, I've decided that you are dead. *(Walking up and down in the room)* Now I think and therefore I am - both: spectator *and* actor. After all, this is what I am as a human geographer in the space of modernity: the subject and the object of my understanding at the same time. Subjected to the subjective. The limitations of our subjectivity form the source of our possibility to know. The very limitations of our body, language, memory, and desire, ... enable us to dimly know our limitations. Even if their absolute location is out of reach. Confined to confinement - at least not solitary - happy social subject! *(Walks to the window, to the audience/actors)* The only problem is that we have too much space in here. Perhaps you know that Sisyphos, while rolling up his stone, dreamt of being caught in a very very small prison cell. So small that his stone would not fit in. *(Looks into the window)* That is you, social scientist. You look at others and see yourself ... *(Checks the fit of her spectacles. Over her shoulder)* That's what you are doing right now, by the way. *(Cleaning the window)* You can look at it from different angles, some reflect more, others less, but in everything out there you can always still recognize yourself, and even better if the objects on the other side are covered in darkness. *(Turns to the audience/actors, sighing)* And you just sit here quietly. How shall I understand this? This whole situation is a problem for me. *(Absorbed in her thoughts)* How is your particular distribution in this room related to your not playing? *(Quickly)* Naturally this is my question as a geographer, somebody else may well be interested in your present mental activities in relation to your silence. I am not, but I presuppose that your spatial distribution and your silence are based on reason and thus neither mere chance nor something that has to be accepted dogmatically. I will try to find the logic in all that.

Stranger Which logic?

Vladimir "Which logic?!" *(To the audience/actors)* Didn't I tell you he lives in another world? *(To the stranger)* It's me who determines what will happen here in this room. You be quiet! It's difficult enough to decide what to consider reasonable ... *(To herself slowly)* Should I try to find some law or regularity describing the relationship between your silence and your spatial distribution? And from which perspective should I look upon it: the spatial analyst's, or the behaviorist's? Or had I better search for the general structural law defining the possibilities open to you? Maybe I ought to ask you about your individual motives - but actually, you yourself might be quite mistaken about their significance. In this case wouldn't it be better to ask for the mechanisms of power that are unconscious to you but still determine where you sit and what you do? *(Walking up and down in the room, in thoughts)* It is all a question of legitimation. To whom do I justify the choice of my approach and the position I thereby took? It is a question of the admittance of commitment. And that leads to the question as to whether I believe that justice is the same as neutrality. It's all a question of the question. The wording of the question is crucial, because to ask does not only presuppose that we do not know the answer, it also requires that we already know in which direction it is headed. From the very beginning it determines what can be accepted as an answer and designates those authorized to give it. *(Looks around)* It's a pity that nobody talks, no insider tells me how to ask in order to explain that nobody talks. And, what's more, nobody shows me which concepts and which form of answer to use for the description. And no help to be expected from outside: the criterion of intersubjective evaluability does not make the choice easier. I rely on you. It is not social scientists only who are both the subject and object of their understanding. You also have the right to determine how you wish to be understood and what you wish to understand. But how can I obtain legitimation if you are behaving like stones! Perhaps you are not in the least interested in the relationship between spatial distribution and intensity of communication, even if you look like geographers! *(Pragmatically)* It is completely pointless to answer somebody who did not ask for an

answer. Even more, it is just another form of oppression to help somebody who did not ask for help. No, I can't go on like this! I don't know how to interpret your silence. This is supposed to be a comedy and I am the only one talking, talking like a speaker at a conference, and all that because I happen to be the only one who came here. (*More calm*) Yes, I was interested in it. It sounded like a good idea to talk about geography in a form different from ordinary lectures. Doesn't the traditional scientific form limit the scope of things that can be expressed? What if my real message is not lying in what I say, but in what shows itself? Traditional scientific expressions only show the logical form of a very specific type of reality.... Why not a comedy? Doesn't our discipline also assign roles to us? Not everybody is lucky enough to get to play his role in life in this comedy as well. Not everybody is allowed to be silent when he has nothing to say. The parts are pre-given, the show must 'progress'. In a comedy, I thought, many different people would talk, would present different perspectives. They would present them explicitly, because in dramatic form everything depends on the convention that the actor says openly, what is only thought in the world outside. Therefore I believed that a play would be a good opportunity to be explicit about the plurality of approaches that characterize today's geography. But, ...

Voice [*From a tape off-stage (the voice does not come from a clearly recognizable direction). Simultaneously the words Noi Tazilaicos" (projected overhead) appear on the wall.*] OK, am I allowed to say something then?

Vladimir (*Turns, scared by the voice*) Who is this?

Voice Sorry that I scared you. My name is Noi Tazilaicos. Perhaps you don't remember me, but we have met before.

Vladimir (*Sceptically looking around*)

Voice I have listened to you for quite a while now, and I believe - that you are talking absolute nonsense. All this relativity you pretend, your pluralism, all these questions They are the wrong type of questions for someone like you. It is not your business to set yourself up as the judge of our society, you are employed because of your factual knowledge. If I told you which question to ask, would you listen to me? Only minutes ago that man over there, Charlie, wanted to say something and you told him to be quiet! On what basis do you decide whose questions are to be answered? You must not make value judgements. Haven't you read Max Weber? "Der Forscher muß die Feststellung empirischer Tatsachen und seine praktisch wertende, d.h. diese Fakten als erfreulich oder unerfreulich bewertende Stellungnahme unbedingt auseinanderhalten." The only truth you will find if you don't separate empirical facts and personal values is the one about your own position. Your research will not shed any light on reality, but only on your accidental view of the individual and society, only on the utopia that swirls in your head, and the values it is built on. It will only point to the history you have constructed out of those events that were comfortable enough to be remembered. Ultimately you will not say anything that can possibly be true, but merely show the language you are talking in. This is exactly what your subjectivity leads to: complete irrelevance of your research to society, information that is of absolutely no use to the decisionmaker, no gain of scientific knowledge whatsoever, no increase of security in predicting events (*'Noi Tazilaicos' sign off*)

Vladimir (*To the wall*) Stop, stop, stop! Who are you to say something like that? Nobody can deny the subjectivity of their existence. Nobody can deny the inescapability of taking up a certain position. Where are you anyway? (*Looks around, gives up searching. To the wall*) I don't want to deny that every question reflects a certain world view. It indicates the language-game we are taking part in. Nevertheless we are trying to choose explicitly in which of the many existing worlds we want to do our research, and in which of the many existing language-games - and in whose game - we want to participate. I believe that there is a choice for the scientist, however limited by his social and personal background. And once he has chosen he should do his best to describe that world. Describe it as closely to the particular view of those who inhabit it as his own position permits. Do you call this a subjective procedure? To me it is this existential choice which constitutes man. How

can you condemn subjectivity? *(To the audience)* Subjectivity, objectivity. I was hoping that this distinction had become extinct! *(To the wall)* Well, call it 'subjective' if you want, but mind; whatever you mean by 'objective' - be it conformity to an object, absence of personal evaluation, the state of general acknowledgement, or completeness in presenting every point of view - when it comes to human knowledge, objectivity is impossible to achieve. An object in itself is incomprehensible... Everything is defined and evaluated by social subjects. Objectives are subjective... The universal myths of emancipation or of philosophy that once could - if they ever did - guarantee some form of general agreement have broken apart... There are many worlds - not only conceivable ones but actual ones, and nobody can truly hope to represent all of them... By the way, if you criticise subjectivity in science, how do you justify the criteria for distinguishing between the objects for scientific research and the objects belonging to the realm of art or religion? ... Subjective or objective; the boundary you draw between these concepts is transformed into the rope of a tight-rope walker. The two terms intertwine: objectivity within the limits of the subjective mind, that is "everything (that) goes". *(To the audience)* I need not concede to him that we cannot completely forget the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. We actually need it to bridge and transcend this dualism... I am sure he is not interested in dialectic arguments anyway ... I know why he really criticises subjectivity. He wants to conceal that what he calls 'objective' is merely another form of it. Power is right there, in the setting of one world-view as the objective one. Set by this nobody, ... merely a voice ... One orders one order.

Voice (*'Noi Tazilaicos'* sign on) Do you really think I can't hear you?

Vladimir (*Shrugs her shoulders*)

Voice In the beginning was the word, and the word was society. You were wrong when you said that you determine what will happen here in this room. There is no need for your monologues, all the more about subjectivity or a multitude of worlds! Listen carefully to what I, Noi Tazilaicos, can give you my word. [*'Noi Tazilaicos'* sign on, but now reversed to show a reversed order of characters (*'socializaT ioN'*)] You are in no position to choose. There are no 'many worlds'. The world is what surrounds you, what you share with everybody here, even with Charlie over there.

Vladimir (*looks to the stranger*)

Voice Mind that I don't say anything about the existence of a world in itself, something absolute behind the appearance. It is quite irrelevant to argue about the existence of an unstructured entity, an essence without concepts, and a being without characteristics. What I'm trying to say is that the world is socially constructed, defined by convention and conserved by culture and institutions. Well conserved, thank God, how should we understand each other if there were no such state of agreement? How could we criticise somebody if there were no general criteria? There is just one world and no freedom to choose. Put your feet on the ground: to be a geographer means to accept the rules of your discipline. Do you want to further progress? Do you want your research to be relevant? Do you want to pass referee's judgements? Then forget about talking a different language. There is just one world and one truth and that's it. You can be sure ... (*'socializaT ioN'* sign off)

Vladimir I don't want to be sure. Okay, there is no doubt about the social construction of a world. It is shaped by definitions, order, deduction, and by the weighting of concepts, all of them solidly founded in everyday practices. And it is held together by institutions and control-mechanisms. This is what we are made to feel. However, the very reason why we feel this is that there are many conflicting worlds and many contradictory truths. Truth is regional and based on a specific form of life. And in each specific region truth even is only one of the measures for correctness. Furthermore, depending on the specific objects and rules it recognizes and the priorities and objectives it assigns to them, each form of life engraved its own scale in these measures. 'Regional' truth. This, however, does not mean that everything can be said and nothing can be done by social scientists. Once we have chosen a language-game, we can uncover its structure of meaning. We can identify nonsense, the use of a word outside its native language game. We can point to internal contradictions by

practicing immanent criticism. We can provide instrumental knowledge, the means to given ends.

Voice ('socializaT ioN' sign on) But what if the ends are the wrong ones? What if they block - like boulders in a stream - the well-being, the progress of the whole society? Do not all our problems stem from such resistance against the main stream? Why not transform resistance to a streamline shape? The river flowed much faster! ('socializaT ioN' sign off)

Vladimir But where to? Well-being and progress do by no means mean the same! You know that, but do you think that we have a trans-culturally and trans-personally universal standard for those. I doubt that we deliberately would agree on one destination. (*To herself*) Techno-logic in ethics and morals? ... No, we need these boulders to divert the stream and form a fan. A fresh breeze!

Voice ('socializaT ioN' sign on. *Ironic*) What a nice metaphor for pluralism! Everybody can have his own stream, everybody can do what he likes, everybody can say what he wants. There is no need to listen because there is no need to agree or disagree. Five thousand speakers at a conference, seats for an audience don't have to be provided, everybody will talk to himself ... ('socializaT ioN' sign off)

Vladimir You seem to take pluralism much easier than everybody here. It is not another word for ignorance! Quite the opposite. It is the respect for other world-views that leads to pluralism. Because of this respect we refuse to translate one language into another and refuse to compare them with our own a priori standards. It is not ours to set ourselves up as the judge of society. (*To the wall*) We don't want to reduce one form of life by pressing it through the conceptual grid of another language. What we are trying to do is not translate languages, but relate ourselves. To become familiar with something else, we are ready to *be* somebody else. To be it as truly as we can without losing our identity. Quite like an actor who tries to *be* the character he embodies in the play. To accept pluralism is not easy at all!

Voice ('socializaT ioN' sign on. *Sarcastic*) What a hero you are! But shortsighted! If I were you I would be more careful about making propositions that deny what gives legitimation to my profession. There is abundant relativity and a surplus of conflicting truths in the world. What else, if not security and one truth do you want to offer society in return for your privileges? Think about it! Agree on the existence of one world. The real thing. Believe me, I know what is best for you. And one more thing. Just one little question: what are you doing here? How can somebody who honestly supports a pluralism of world views criticise someone who has a different view? The very moment you open your mouth you contradict your own words. Don't you yourself prove the impossibility of pluralism! (*Laughs*. 'socializaT ioN' sign off)

Vladimir (*Looks to the ceiling, stops, eyes closed. Remembers the presence of the audience/actors. Absent minded, tired*) If you really know everything much better, tell me why do they (*points to the audience/actors*) not start to play the comedy they have announced?

Voice (*Makes no reply*)

Vladimir So you don't know either! Okay, then I will show you ... I have an answer to your sarcastic remark saying that I would contradict my arguments for pluralism by arguing against your position. "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." I will play this geographical comedy, and it will be absurd. The mixing of language and metalanguage leads to absurdity. You (*points to the audience*) will be the audience, and you, Mr Nobody, will be my partner. I am the fool. (*Clears her throat*) Come on, let us start.

Voice ('socializaT ioN' sign on) No. You will not play a comedy here. I, Noi Tazilaicos, prohibit the performance of comedies in my territory.

Vladimir (*Clears her throat again and with disguised voice*) I - do - not - understand - you.

Voice (*Gives the order*) Charlie, contract contingent control. Convertible conveyor confidence. Execute exhaustive expenditure! Export exogenous substance. Hurry!

Stranger (*Opens the file, takes out a stapler, fastens V's arms on her back, fixes V's mouth closed, and pushes her towards the door*)

Vladimir (*Reports without emotions*) *S opens the file, takes out a stapler, fastens V's arms on her back, fixes V's mmmm ... (Obeys without resistance, looks back and leaves)*