

Theoretical Construction and Critique of Structuralist Human Geography: Development Context, Academic Contributions, and Contemporary Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Structuralist human geography emerging between the 1960s and 1980s, its theoretical foundations stem from the interdisciplinary integration of linguistics, anthropology, and Marxism, emphasizing the revelation of deep-seated social structures and power relations behind spatial phenomena from holistic and systematic perspectives. The school has propelled geography from descriptive to explanatory research, introducing core theories such as “production of space,” “capitalist spatial logic,” and “urban political economy analysis”, providing critical perspectives for understanding socio-spatial relations. However, its tendency toward structural determinism and economic reductionism limits its ability to explain individual agency and new social phenomena. Nevertheless, the theoretical legacy of structuralism remains relevant in critiques of neoliberal urbanization and environmental geography, continuously expanding its scope of application through integration with other theories. This paper explores the developmental context, academic contributions, and limitations of structuralist human geography.

KEYWORDS

Structuralism; Production of Space; Capitalist Spatial Logic; Urban Political Economy; Theoretical Limitations.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a discipline studying the interplay between human activities and geographical space, human geography's diverse ideological schools reflect changing understandings of the relationship between human society and space across different eras. Among these, structuralist human geography holds a significant position in academia due to its unique theoretical perspectives and methodologies. With the acceleration of globalization and the increasing complexity of social structures, understanding the interaction between social structures and spatial production has become a core issue in human geography research.

The rise and development of structuralist human geography have not only enriched the theoretical framework of human geography but also provided new perspectives for social science research. Rooted in the interdisciplinary integration of linguistics, anthropology, and Marxism, it employs structural analysis to uncover the deep-seated social structures and power relations behind spatial phenomena. This paradigm emphasizes understanding space from holistic and systematic viewpoints, focusing on the decisive role of social structures in individual behaviors and spatial forms, thereby injecting new vitality into geographic research.

This study aims to systematically analyze the developmental context, academic contributions, and contemporary reflections of structuralist human geography, exploring its significance in the field of

human geography. Through a comparative analysis of relevant literature, it seeks to reveal how the structuralist school promotes the transformation of human geography from traditional descriptive to explanatory research via interdisciplinary integration, as well as its innovations and limitations in theory and methodology. This not only deepens the understanding of structuralist human geography but also provides theoretical and methodological references for current geographic research.

2. DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY OF THE STRUCTURALIST SCHOOL

The intellectual foundations of structuralist human geography are deeply rooted in cross-disciplinary dialogues that transcended traditional academic boundaries. Before delving into its geographical manifestations, it is essential to unpack the philosophical and theoretical antecedents that shaped its core frameworks.

2.1. Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Origins

The structuralist paradigm emerged from a confluence of theoretical insights across linguistics, philosophy, and anthropology. These disciplines provided both methodological tools and conceptual frameworks that would later be adapted to geographic inquiry.

2.1.1. Saussurean Linguistic Structuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure, regarded as the father of modern linguistics, whose linguistic structuralism laid a foundational stone for the structuralist school, is credited with initiating a “revolutionary paradigm shift” across disciplines^[1]. His core concepts and theories include two key points: First, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure divided linguistic activity into *langue* (the abstract, communal linguistic system) and *parole* (individual linguistic usage)^[2]. *Langue* is a shared, impersonal system, while *parole* is the concrete application of language by individuals^[3]. Second, synchronic vs. diachronic studies. He distinguished between synchronic linguistics (studying language states at a specific time, focusing on coexisting elements) and diachronic linguistics (studying historical language evolution). Saussure prioritized synchronic research, arguing that linguistic structures in a synchronic state better reflect the essence of language, as they reveal its constants^[3].

Saussure’s analysis of the linguistic sign system, particularly the concepts of signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*), provided a new lens for structuralists to study language and cultural phenomena. He posited that language is a system of signs, where a linguistic sign consists of a signifier (sound image) and a signified (concept), connecting concepts to sound images rather than things to names^[4]. This semiotic perspective, where sign meanings are determined by intra-systemic relationships rather than direct correspondences with external reality, challenged traditional views of language-reality connections^[5]. It inspired geographers to treat “space” as a socially constructed sign system, shifting geographic research from describing “spatial forms” to analyzing “structural logics behind space.”

Saussure’s linguistic theories laid the groundwork for structuralism, with his terms and concepts widely adopted and developed by subsequent structuralists. While structuralism became a broad intellectual movement spanning philosophy, literary theory, and social sciences, its core ideas originated in Saussure’s work^[6]. His synchronic approach, systemic thinking, and analyses of linguistic sign structures provided essential research frameworks. For example, Claude Lévi-Strauss applied Saussurean methods to study kinship structures and mythologies in primitive tribes, arguing that these structures exhibit synchronicity and transformational rules^[3]. Saussure’s theory of linguistic sign value systems thus provided profound theoretical support for structuralism’s development.

Saussure’s influence extended beyond linguistics. In linguistics, his theories shifted research from historical-comparative to synchronic systemic approaches, marking the beginning of modern

linguistics^[7]. In the humanities and social sciences, his structuralist ideas were widely adopted in literature, anthropology, and sociology, offering new perspectives and methodologies. In cultural anthropology, Lévi-Strauss applied Saussurean linguistics to study kinship, myths, and totemic taboos, uncovering structural regularities behind these cultural phenomena^[8]. Saussure's theories sparked a structuralist intellectual trend, driving a "paradigm shift" in the humanities and social sciences that directed attention to the role of language and sign systems in sociocultural contexts. In summary, Saussurean linguistic structuralism was pioneering and foundational to the development of structuralism, exerting profound influence on linguistics and the social sciences.

2.1.2. Althusser's Structural Marxism

French philosopher Louis Althusser's structural Marxism provided critical theoretical support for applying structuralism to Marxist studies. Althusser proposed "structural causality," arguing that society is a holistic system composed of multi-layered structures (economic, political, ideological), where the economic base influences the superstructure through "overdetermination."

Althusser's structural analysis of Marxism emphasized applying structuralist methods to Marxist theory, advocating for holistic and systematic analyses of social phenomena while rejecting reductions to individual behaviors or consciousness. He posited an "epistemological break" in Marx's intellectual development, dividing it into an ideological phase and a scientific phase^[9]. Althusser argued that Marxism is "theoretically anti-humanist," asserting the need to "smash the myth of humanist philosophy," as humanism-contrasted with scientific philosophy-represents an ideology that hinders accurate understandings of social reality^[10]. He advocated reinterpreting Marxism from a structural perspective, opposing essentialist readings and emphasizing the multi-deterministic nature of social phenomena (shaped by economic, political, cultural, and ideological factors)^[11]. Additionally, he viewed ideology as a tool for maintaining social domination, shaping people's thoughts and behaviors to foster compliance with the status quo^[12]. Althusser distinguished between deep and surface structures^[13], emphasizing the internality of structures (their closure and independence from historical context)^[14].

While controversial-such as his rejection of humanism, which sparked academic debates-Althusser's theories significantly contributed to integrating structuralism with Marxism, advancing Marxist theory. His work laid groundwork for critical analyses of capitalist structures in human geography.

2.1.3. Lévi-Strauss's Anthropological Structural Analysis

French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological structural analysis provided methodological foundations for the structuralist school in human geography. Lévi-Strauss argued that deep, unconscious, universal structures organize human cultural phenomena through binary oppositions^[15]. He advocated "structural analysis" to reveal hidden cultural logics, applying structuralist methods to anthropology while incorporating Marxist insights that culture reflects social structures. Widely using binary oppositions (e.g., nature/culture, raw/cooked) as fundamental cultural components, he argued that the superficial diversity of sociocultural phenomena masks universal deep structures.

In his mythological studies, Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that different cultures' myths, despite surface differences, share common deep logics (e.g., binary oppositions). He also proposed modeling structures as formal mathematical systems, emphasizing element homogeneity and transformability, and argued that structures require agents for movement, functioning as self-perpetuating systems^[16].

Human geography's structuralist school adopted Lévi-Strauss's holistic thinking, treating space as a product of social relations rather than a mere natural environment^[17]. His work inspired geographers to focus on "cultural codings" in spatial practices, such as the symbolic meanings of binary structures like urban-rural divides and center-periphery relations. By analyzing deep structures (e.g., power relations, class contradictions) behind geographic phenomena, the school revealed the social roots of spatial inequalities, prioritizing static, systemic analyses over historical narratives^[15].

Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, with its emphasis on deep logics, systemic holism, and formal analysis, provided methodological foundations for structuralist human geography. The school shifted from historical linear narratives to synchronic spatial structure analyses (e.g., urban functional zoning, regional economic networks), treating space as a reflection of social structures and critiquing traditional geography's superficial descriptions through power and economic logic analyses. However, its emphasis on structural determinism sparked debates about "agentic autonomy"^[16].

Saussure's linguistic structuralism, Lévi-Strauss's cultural practice analysis, and Althusser's Marxism collectively played pivotal roles in the development of structuralist human geography. Saussure's symbolic system analysis enabled geographers to decode linguistic signs in geographic phenomena; Lévi-Strauss's revelation of deep cultural logics highlighted the role of cultural factors in spatial formation; Althusser's Marxist critiques injected anti-capitalist perspectives, fundamentally shifting geographic research from descriptive to deconstructive paradigms.

2.2. The Structuralist Turn in Geography

Between the 1960s and 1980s, geography underwent a profound "structuralist turn," involving not only research paradigm innovations but also comprehensive methodological and theoretical reconstructions. This shift was both a critique of traditional positivist geography and an academic response to socioeconomic changes.

2.2.1. Paradigm and Perspective Shifts

From the 1950s to 1970s, labor relations research in Europe and America shifted from empirical to structural analyses. Dunlop's systems theory and Oxford School pluralism, influenced by structural functionalism, emphasized the determinative role of structures in labor relations. Later, post-structuralism critiqued structuralism, challenging assumptions of ideological consistency^[18]. The Birmingham School transitioned from empiricist cultural studies and literary sociology to structuralist ideological analysis and philosophical research, employing "symptomatic reading" and other structuralist methods^[19]. British cultural Marxist studies shifted from "culturalist" paradigms (focused on culture and subjectivity) to "structuralist" paradigms (using ideological theory to expose capitalist cultural power mechanisms), and eventually to a "Gramscian turn" emphasizing popular culture and social struggle practices^[20]. Marxist geography's methodologies influenced the structuralist school, expanding its focus to social inequalities, power relations, and cultural differences in geographic space^[21].

2.2.2. Theoretical and Methodological Shifts

Within structuralism, there was a transition from reductive structuralism (focused on macrostructural changes and single-factor determinism) to pluralist structuralism (emphasizing cultural and multi-factor interactions). The rise of relational structuralism shifted perceptions of social structures from static entities to dynamic networks of social relations, explaining phenomena through relational frameworks (e.g., Charles Tilly's social mechanism theory, Gerald L. Runkle's elite conflict theory)^[22]. Methodologically, research evolved from static, single-factor analyses to dynamic, multi-factor integrative approaches, emphasizing relational construction and interaction^[23].

2.2.3. Critique of Positivist Geography

Structuralist geographers critiqued positivism for reducing space to an "objective container," arguing instead that space is a product of social relations. David Harvey proposed a "socio-spatial dialectic," emphasizing space as both a medium and outcome of social processes. Through analyses of capital accumulation and spatial production, he revealed the capitalist logic underlying urbanization.

Positivism, despite its rigor in pursuing general laws, faced challenges in humanistic contexts. Its reductionist tendencies undermined the credibility of conclusions and hindered theoretical progress^[24]. Critics argued that positivist geography overemphasized empirical data and quantitative analysis

while neglecting the social, economic, and political contexts of geographic phenomena. Marxist geography critiqued its lack of social connotation, highlighting that geographic phenomena are complex social products, not merely explainable by empirical data^[21]. Cai Yunlong identified three flaws in positivism: neglect of geography's traditional "explanatory description" methods, overemphasis on deduction over induction, and failure to address the dialectical relationship between deduction and induction, leading to methodological one-sidedness^[25]. Sun Jun argued that positivist geography's homogenized, objective, quantifiable spatial epistemology resulted in a "world without people," excluding human subjectivity and emotional experiences and lacking humanistic depth^[26]. Others noted its focus on quantifiable factors (e.g., natural, social, demographic data) in rural settlement studies, neglecting intangible cultural and religious factors and lacking a holistic geographic perspective^[27]. Harvey's spatial theory, while rooted in historical materialism, retained positivist traces, attributing capitalist crises to external spatial factors and neglecting internal contradictions in production relations. His emphasis on use-value production and elevation of consumption crises over capitalist fundamental contradictions deviated from Marxist orthodoxy^[28].

2.2.4. Contributions of Key Scholars

David Harvey, a prominent contemporary Marxist geographer, has profoundly influenced geography and sociology, with his spatial theories garnering widespread academic attention^[29]. His work emphasizes that space is a product of social relations and a spatial manifestation of social processes, rejecting absolute concepts of space and linking it to sociopolitical and economic factors. Spatial organization reflects social power relations and interest distributions^[30]. In his theory of spatial production, Harvey argues that space is socially produced under capitalism, becoming a commodity and tool for capital accumulation. Processes like urbanization and land commercialization exemplify this, as seen in gentrification, where capital reconfigures space to dispossess low-income groups^[31]. Methodologically, he advocates interdisciplinary approaches, integrating history, sociology, and economics to comprehensively understand geographic phenomena^[25]. Harvey views class struggle as a driver of social change, with spatial transformations serving as a key manifestation, and advocates for spatial justice through class struggle to address capitalist spatial inequalities^[32]. In urban studies, he analyzes how urban spatial structures reflect capitalist socioeconomic relations, with spatial segregation and inequality arising from class struggles^[33]. His "time-space compression" theory highlights how capitalist development and technological progress have accelerated social interactions, transforming spatial-temporal relationships and complicating social spaces^[34].

Doreen Massey, a leading geographer, integrated Marxist political economy, post-structuralist geography, and feminist theory in her interdisciplinary research^[35]. She emphasized space as a product of social relations, dynamically constructed through interacting social forces, shifting geographic research from spatial description to relational analysis and focusing on space-society interactions^[36]. In regional studies, she argued that regions are open, relational spaces shaped by transboundary flows rather than closed entities. Her concept of "power geometry" analyzed how power circulates and interacts in space through social relations, rejecting centralized power models^[37]. In gender-spatial research, Massey advocated for spatial equality for women, examining gendered spatial practices and constraints, and how women negotiate spatial rights through daily activities^[37]. Her dynamic view of regions as interconnected spaces challenged traditional regional concepts, providing new directions for structuralist geography to address social change.

Neil Smith's research on rent revealed the value relations of land and space under capitalism, defining rent as a key manifestation of spatial value and linking its fluctuations to land scarcity. His concept of "spatial dispossession" addressed social inequalities in spatial resource allocation, while his studies of urban spatial restructuring analyzed power dynamics in spatial organization. Smith emphasized space as a site of power relations, where power distributions shape spatial structures and, in turn, influence social relations.

The theories of Harvey, Massey, and Smith significantly advanced structuralist geography, enriching its theoretical framework and driving the shift from descriptive to explanatory research. Their focus on spatial production, power relations, and diversity provided new perspectives, while their critiques of capitalist spatial inequalities offered theoretical support for social change and spatial restructuring.

2.2.5. Social and Academic Contexts of the Turn

The structuralist turn in geography (1960s-1980s) reflected broader shifts in research methods, theoretical perspectives, and understandings of space-society-economy relations. Moving beyond objective descriptions of spatial phenomena, geographers increasingly analyzed underlying social structures, power relations, and economic logics, viewing space as socially constructed rather than natural. This shift emerged from critiques of positivism and a desire to better understand space-society interactions.

Structuralist geography developed amid interdisciplinary cross-fertilization. Since the 1980s, social sciences have trended toward pluralism and “postmodernism,” prompting Western economic geography to undergo concurrent “institutional,” “cultural,” “relational,” and “scalar” turns that fueled theoretical innovation^[38]. Traditional geographic theories’ limitations in explaining complex phenomena drove the search for new perspectives. Influenced by sociopolitical and cultural upheavals, human geographers abandoned positivism, embracing radical currents that emphasized humanism and postmodernism, giving rise to structuralist geography^[39].

Structuralism emphasizes structure and relations. Structuralist geography examines spatial structures and organizations, viewing geographic phenomena as structurally determined. The shift from natural to social space involves reorienting research toward social spaces and recognizing space as continuously produced through “society-space relations”^[40]. It also investigates how social relations shape geographic spaces, with economic geography’s “relational turn” focusing on socio-spatial relations across scales to understand capitalist time-space^[41]. Structures are seen as both stable (with internal logics determining phenomena) and dynamic (evolving with sociocultural changes), influencing subfields like emotional geography, which studies emotions as socially and culturally constructed^[42]. Michel Foucault’s spatial theory, emphasizing historically contingent spatial restructuring, exemplifies structural dynamism^[43].

Methodologically, structuralist geography adopts interdisciplinary approaches, integrating theories from sociology, economics, and political science. Economic geography’s “institutional turn” borrowed from multiple disciplines to analyze regional development^[44], while media geography’s interdisciplinary framework incorporated structuralism to study space-media relations. These approaches strengthened geographic theory and addressed interdisciplinary challenges^[45], such as natural geography’s “cultural turn,” which bridged the natural and social sciences to tackle sustainability issues^[46].

The structuralist turn in geography resulted from 1960s-1980s social transformations and intellectual trends. Rising social movements, capitalist crises, and accelerating globalization/urbanization prompted geographers to focus on space’s social and political dimensions. Interdisciplinary theories, critiques of positivism, and disciplinary demands for new tools provided intellectual foundations. This shift not only moved geography from description to explanation but also offered fresh perspectives on space-society interactions.

3. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STRUCTURALIST SCHOOL

Having established its intellectual lineage and disciplinary context, it is crucial to examine how structuralism enriched geographic theory. Its contributions span methodological innovations, core theoretical constructs, and cross-disciplinary impacts.

3.1. Methodological Innovations

The structuralist school's methodological innovations were central to its theoretical development. First, it shifted from descriptive analysis to explanatory frameworks. Traditional geography focused on objective descriptions of spatial forms (e.g., topography, population distribution), while structuralism emphasized revealing underlying structural logics through the socio-spatial dialectic. David Harvey introduced Marxist political economy into geography, proposing the "capital circulation" theory to analyze how capital achieves spatial fixes through urbanization and land commercialization. Inspired by Saussurean linguistics, geographers treated space as a socially constructed sign system, interpreting urban-rural opposites and center-periphery relations as symbolic expressions of power dynamics.

Second, structuralism deepened the theory of spatial production. Henri Lefebvre criticized positivist methods in French urban sociology as reductive and ideologically blinding, unable to reveal the political essence of urban space^[47]. He emphasized the duality of space: both a product of social relations and a producer of them. Capitalist spatial production generates contradictions like value vs. use-value and center vs. periphery^[48]. His concept of "the production of space" was further developed by structuralists, who highlighted space as a terrain for capital accumulation and class struggle. Harvey exemplified this by analyzing gentrification to expose how capital dispossesses low-income groups through spatial restructuring.

Finally, structuralism abandoned static descriptions in favor of dynamic synchronic analysis. Doreen Massey's "power geometry" examined how global flows of capital, people, and information reconfigure core-periphery relations, illustrating structuralism's capacity for dynamic spatial analysis.

3.2. Core Theoretical Constructs

The structuralist school's most enduring contributions lie in its theories about how capitalism and urbanization shape space.

3.2.1. Capitalist Spatial Logic

The structuralist school's core theories include capitalist spatial logic and urban political economy. Capitalist spatial logic, a key framework for understanding contemporary socio-geographic phenomena, encompasses interconnected dimensions shaping spatial forms and social relations under capitalism.

Capital circulation and spatial fixes, proposed by Harvey, explain how capitalism transfers overaccumulation crises through geographic expansion, turning space into a tool for capital 增殖 (valorization). Urban spaces become sites of capital accumulation, driving land commercialization and urban restructuring-e.g., real estate development replacing farmland and industrial parks. Market saturation in these sectors triggers crises and exacerbates urban-rural inequalities by displacing low-income residents^[49].

Unbalanced geographic development, highlighted by Neil Smith, refers to capital's strategy of maximizing profits by creating regional disparities, leading to "spatial dispossession." Resource and market inequalities cause capital to concentrate in privileged regions, deepening economic and social divides between areas.

Time-space compression, analyzed by Harvey, describes how information technology and globalization accelerate capital flows, shrinking spatial-temporal distances while intensifying social inequalities. Developed nations consolidate dominance through tech innovation and capital export, marginalizing developing countries in this process.

3.2.2. Urban Political Economy Analysis

In urban political economy, gentrification and spatial dispossession are key themes. Coined by British scholar Glass, gentrification denotes the replacement of working-class neighborhoods by middle-class residents, involving housing renewal, ownership shifts, and price hikes^[50]. Smith's *The New Urban Frontier* exposes urban renewal as capital's predation of low-income communities, forcing displacement to inflate land values.

The right to the city, proposed by Harvey, argues that urban space should serve public needs 而非 (rather than) capital interests, calling for spatial justice through class struggle. Under capitalism, urban planning often prioritizes profit over equity, making this concept critical for equitable urban development.

Power relations and gendered space, explored by Doreen Massey, integrates feminist perspectives into structuralism. She analyzed how patriarchal norms and capitalist labor divisions create spatial segregation (e.g., home/workplace separation), reinforcing gender inequalities. This work highlights the intersection of gender, class, and space in capitalist societies.

3.3. Disciplinary Influences

Structuralism's impact on geography is evident in the rise of critical geography and the development of interdisciplinary methodologies. Critical geography, deeply influenced by structuralism, shifted the discipline from "neutral description" to "critical deconstruction." Marxist geography, for example, uses the "spatial fix" concept to expose capitalist spatial exploitation, integrating geography with political economy and sociology. Harvey's "historical-geographical materialism" provides a unified framework for analyzing globalization, emphasizing the interplay of historical and geographic factors.

In globalization and urbanization studies, structuralist tools like time-space compression theory clarify how transnational corporations and financial capital reshape global geography. Manuel Castells' "space of flows," inspired by structuralism, reveals power decentralization in network societies, offering new insights into informatization-era urbanization.

Methodologically, structuralism influenced economic geography's "relational turn," which emphasizes social networks and institutional embeddedness in regional development. Postcolonial scholars also borrowed structuralist critiques of Western centrism-e.g., Edward Said's "Orientalism"-to re-examine non-Western spatial practices and challenge imperialist spatial narratives.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STRUCTURALIST SCHOOL

4.1. Theoretical Deficiencies

Despite its innovations, structuralism has notable limitations. Its framework overemphasizes macrostructural determinism, neglecting the dynamic roles of individual agency and cultural diversity. Harvey's "capital circulation" theory, while insightful, reduces individual actions to passive responses to structural oppression, failing to explain how social movements (e.g., community protests) renegotiate spatial power through local practices. Lévi-Strauss' binary models flatten complex cultural practices into static symbol systems, struggling to account for the fluidity of non-Western multicultural realities.

Additionally, its economic reductionism undermines explanatory power by sidelining non-economic factors like ecology, gender, and race. Neil Smith's "spatial dispossession" theory, focused on class conflict, overlooks the specificity of environmental justice and indigenous land rights in spatial marginalization.

4.2. Inadequate Real-World Explanatory Power

Structuralism struggles to address post-Fordist flexible production and digital spaces. Global platform economies and gig work have redefined labor-space relations, yet structuralist analyses of “labor space” remain tied to factory and urban geography. Digital space’s virtuality and fluidity challenge its materialist framework—Castells’ “space of flows,” for instance, highlights decentralized power in the information age^[51], contrasting with structuralism’s reliance on “center-periphery” binaries.

Its applicability to non-Western contexts is also contested. Postcolonial critics argue its Western centrism treats non-Western societies as passive “structured” objects, ignoring their agentic resistances and spatial practice heterogeneities.

4.3. Critiques from Post-Structuralism and Feminism

Post-structuralism and feminism have further deconstructed structuralism’s foundations. Foucault’s “microphysics of power” challenges its macro-determinism, emphasizing how power operates through everyday practices (e.g., disciplinary technologies, discourse) in local spaces, not just overarching structures. Feminist geography critiques its class-centrism, highlighting how intersecting gender, race, and class dynamics produce differentiated spatial experiences. While Massey introduced gender perspectives, her work still struggles to fully escape structural determinism.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Enduring Theoretical Legacy

Despite these limitations, structuralism remains a vital critical tool in contemporary human geography, evolving through dialogues with other schools. Its legacy persists in critiques of neoliberal urbanization: Harvey’s analysis of financialized cities uncovers how capital exacerbates inequality via real estate speculation and public space privatization. Lefebvre’s “production of space” theory has been extended to environmental geography, where political ecologists critique capitalist commodification of natural resources and advocate for socio-ecological spatial justice.

5.2. Integration with Complementary Theories

Structuralism has revised itself through cross-theoretical integration. Anthony Giddens’ “structuration theory” mediates structure and agency, arguing that social actions are both constrained by and reproduce structures, offering new ways to analyze individual strategies in digital labor and flexible spaces. Postcolonial geography, by deconstructing Western centrism, has enabled non-Western scholars to reclaim spatial subjectivity through “decolonizing spatial narratives.”

To evaluate structuralism’s contemporary relevance, a balanced approach of critique and inheritance is necessary. Its insights into capital logic and power relations remain essential for analyzing globalization and urbanization, but it must abandon economic reductionism and Western-centric assumptions to incorporate multiple subjectivities and multi-scalar analyses. For example, emotional geography’s integration of structuralism and phenomenology explores how emotions are socially constructed and influence spatial practices, addressing structuralism’s deficits while equipping human geography to tackle challenges like technological revolution and ecological crisis.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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