

Reply: Still Hoping to Turn That Theoretical Corner

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We welcome the commentary by John Pickles on our efforts in Wright et al. (this issue) to reflect on and in turn stimulate a wider debate about the epistemological assumptions, or lack thereof, of GIS and the need for theory that transcends the technical. How indeed did it take the field of GIS thirty years to begin asking fundamental questions about its own practice, and its commitments to the intellectual as well as the practical? It is interesting to note that two of the three authors of our Forum essay received their Ph.Ds in the 1990s. They represent “the new generation” of academics, many of whom are now asking these fundamental questions because no ontology or epistemology of GIS was passed down to them.

In his response, Pickles, while applauding our efforts, takes us to task for failing to engage the issues fully. Our stated intentions were merely to raise questions that we hoped could be answered by those better versed in philosophy and in the social/human side of geography. These are the people who can, as Pickles states, “engage directly and more substantially the complexities and abstractions of philosophies of science and the theories of knowledge and society associated with them” (p. 369). Yes, we are “the technocists,” but we are also willing to step out of our comfort zone and to encourage other technocists to do the same. Liken us if you will to a geographical Michael Jordan: well-trained in a technocist/positivist brand of basketball but willing to have a go at the postpositivist reworkings of baseball. We did not promise to provide all the answers. We did state our intention to provide at least a skeleton or a starting point for discussion. For instance, we must respectfully disagree with Pickles’s assertion that our essay made “no references to any works in the philosophy and sociology of science” (p. 369). Our references to works such as Bauer (1992), Cloke et al. (1991), Feibleman (1972),

Haines-Young and Petch (1986), Hindess (1977), Johnston (1986), Keat and Urry (1975), Popper (1959), Sayer (1992), Smith (1992), and Sui (1994), were intended to alert the “technocists” to a wider body of helpful literature. In fact, many of those references were mentioned in the original 1993 GIS-L postings, not all of which were “unreflective.”

In the end, we applaud Pickles for giving serious consideration to our musings and for taking the discussion to the next level. It is indeed time for “the hard work of theory” to begin.

References

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