

Interactive comment on “Vollzug und Sprache Physischer Geographie und die Frage geographischen Takts” by B. Zahnen

B. Zahnen

barbara.zahnen@geo.hu-berlin.de

Received and published: 24 March 2011

Many thanks to M. Hannah for his detailed and valuable comment and especially for his effort to translate some parts of my paper very sensitively. In my reply to Hannah I should like to show that, due to some losses in Hannah’s reading of my paper, the critical aspects of his otherwise very positive comment can be regarded as being inadequate.

Before doing this, just as a footnote, I want to remark that, in spite of Hannah’s sensitivity to different layers of meaning in the German language, some of the translations are not without problems. For example, if it were not too much of an imposition to English native speakers, I would prefer to speak of “the ununderstood” [Unverstandenes] rather than of “the not-understood” (Hannah 2011, C7), in order to avoid the danger of being

Full Screen / Esc

Printer-friendly Version

Interactive Discussion

Discussion Paper



trapped in a kind of thinking bound to a binary logic which is incompatible with the issue of my paper. And I would also not speak of an “*overall* picture” (ibid., C5 and C7), because this formulation connotes a kind of completability and corresponding holism which is exactly what I renounce. It is not for nothing that – in good hermeneutic tradition – I speak of a principal incompleteness [prinzipielle Unabschließbarkeit] (Zahnen 2011, 20) and, in many passages of my paper, of processes of experiencing and/or (re-)presentation that have to be realized “*immer wieder neu*”, that is, again and again and always in a new way, so that they let us “get the picture”, or live and experience [leben und er-leben] our contextuality, again and again and always in a new way. This is a central aspect of my essay, expressing its relation to hermeneutics in the existential sense. So the paper’s idea, idiom and realization is not only phenomenological, as Hannah states (Hannah 2011, C4), but hermeneutical (in the Heideggerian existential sense) at the same time. The problem is, however, that its hermeneutic aspect, in my view, is not brought out in Hannah’s comment. This is also reflected in the fact that the latter parts of the paper (chapters 9 and 10) to which the hermeneutic aspect is very central, are scarcely taken into account in the comment, although it is these parts which show *that*, and *in which way*, my paper fulfils the aims that are formulated at the beginning of the paper.

With that said, let me refute Hannah’s judgement that “some of the paper’s central ambitions exceed its capability to fulfil them” (ibid., C8), and also his objection that what I am writing about “remains, at bottom, anthropocentric” (ibid., C7). In fact, I wonder whether it could be said that the “central ambitions” that Hannah ascribes to my paper rather correspond, at least in part, to the *reviewer’s* expectations, or *his* questions (e.g. regarding Actor Network Theory) and/or *his* ways of approaching, than to *my* intentions. I am saying this for several reasons:

Firstly, it was not the ambition of my paper to elaborate on and “to resolve problems that plague Actor Network Theory” (ibid., C7), as one might think when reading Hannah’s comment. Still, I insist that the *attitude* involved in doing, or rather living, (physical)

geography that is presented in my paper is incompatible with the attitude that is characteristic of Actor Network Theory, and consequently also for its problems. The latter attitude is not led [geleitet von und *getragen*] by the ununderstood, irresolvably, and always in a new way (I will come back to this point below).

Secondly, I did not address the idea of a “conversation with the Earth” *solely* in order to give a “characterization of physical geographic praxis” (ibid., C8) and to thematize “the ability to recognize significant anomalies ... in the field” (ibid., C8) which, of course, and as Hannah correctly states, touches the phenomenon of Aufmerksamkeit that Waldenfels (2004) elaborates on (I have referred to this book myself in an earlier work, see Zahnen 2008).

Furthermore, I would not reduce the aim of my essay – or one of its aims – to the “claim that a physical geography which reflected more systematically on its activities from a phenomenological perspective would enrich its understanding of what it is doing” (Hannah 2011, C8) – although, of course, I would appreciate such reflections.

What is missing in all these readings of my paper is a consideration of the decisive fact that

- I do *not only* write about “the lived, embodied experience of physical geographic research” (ibid., C8) in the field and the fact that this research, due to an ever-changing sphere of the natural formations of the earth, is led [geleitet von und *getragen*] and must be led by the *ununderstood*. (This irresolvable sphere of the ununderstood as the “tragender Anspruch” of the natural formations of the earth not only transcends our historico-socio-culturally bound grasp of these formations, but is also an expression of the researcher’s or the human being’s limitedness, rather than an expression of “a kind of underlying match between [the researcher and the natural formations]”, as Hannah suggests (ibid., C7). This limitedness, and its corresponding attitude, is prior to, or primary, compared to the “epistemological capabilities of the scientist” (ibid.), which is also why what I



am writing about is, at bottom, precisely *not* anthropocentric.)

- I *also* write about the problem of how to “keep in touch with” [wahren] this sphere, or Anspruch, in our *texts* or (*re-*)*presentations* (see the beginning of chapter 10 of Zahnen 2011, 27f., especially), and
- even more, I show that, and in which way, it is possible to think geography – or rather geographicity (or geographicality) – in a new way. According to this new conception of geography, the work of geographers, in the course of constantly rewriting geography [immer wieder neu] in an existential hermeneutic sense, not only realizes this task of keeping in touch with the Anspruch of the natural formations of the earth, but also opens new ways of understanding and working with historical materials of the tradition of geography or the earth sciences (see Zahnen 2011, 31ff.). In this respect, the central statement of my paper is the following: “Sie [Geographie] wird vollzogen, und sie trägt sich selbst, indem sie – geographie-schreibend – einem Anspruch der irdischen ‘Materialitäten’ nicht nur im Feld, sondern auch in den Materialien des Fachs folgt.” (ibid., 32). Thus, geographical tact is not only indispensable in the field, it is also necessary to produce texts of genuine geographical quality that reveal hitherto fallow, or misunderstood, potentials of geography and its materials, and
- my paper itself can be regarded as an expression and an example of this new way of performing, or fulfilling, geography (see ibid., 33).

Thus, if, at the beginning of my essay, I claim to introduce a revised understanding, or conception [Selbstverständnis] of physical geography, I do not primarily refer to some kind of reflection on its *current* activities or praxis, so that today’s physical geography can “enrich its understanding of what it is doing” (Hannah 2011, C8), but rather to this new possibility of writing, performing or fulfilling, “physical” geography, the possibility of which arises from an Anspruch of the natural formations of the earth which is kept

in geographical (re-)presentations, corresponding to a language of Physical Geography *in the twofold sense* (see especially chapters 1 and 10 of Zahnen 2011). At the same time, this revelation of the possibility of (a language) of Physical Geography in the twofold sense – a revelation in the form of a textual geographical formation which is multi-layered and transitional [übergänglich] in itself – is my answer to the question posed at the very beginning of the introduction to my paper: in what way can the so-called “material dimension” (that plagues today’s social and cultural scientists) be involved in our thinking and (re-)presentations. We can’t completely grasp this dimension, but we can follow its Anspruch, in the field, as well as in our writings of genuine geographical quality. To show this, was the aim of my essay.

References:

Hannah, M. (2011): Interactive comment on “Vollzug und Sprache Physischer Geographie und die Frage geographischen Takts” by B. Zahnen, Social Geography Discussions 7, C4-C9.

Waldenfels, B. (2004): Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Zahnen, B. (2008): Schleichende Risiken als geographisches Problem der Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie der Geographie. Geographische Revue 10, 1, S. 15-29.

Zahnen, B. (2011): Vollzug und Sprache Physischer Geographie und die Frage geographischen Takts, Social Geography Discussions 7, 1-37.

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 7, 1, 2011.

[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)[Discussion Paper](#)