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ARTICLE



How to incorporate theory in (urban) field trips: the built environment as concrete abstraction

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ABSTRACT

Classroom teaching and field trips are both conventional ways of teaching geography in higher education. But where the former can be highly theoretical and abstract, the latter is rather practical, empirical, and concrete. In this paper, I argue there is a need to better incorporate theory into field trips. I seek to explore relations between theory and field trips both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, I draw upon Henri Lefebvre and Bertell Ollman and argue for seeing the built environment as *concrete abstractions*. Based on interviews with teachers, theoretical reflections, and, not least, personal experiences, I end the paper offering practical steps towards better combining theory and field trips.

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Introduction

When investigating urban phenomena, the object of study might literally be just outside the window. While field trips tend to be an empirically focused activity, in sharp contrast, much classroom teaching within human geography is highly theoretical (for example, structured around abstract and general themes like neoliberal urbanism, gentrification, neoliberalism, and marginalization, etc.). Going on a field trip means leaving the conventional site of study; and it brings with it a whole new way of learning. But as Trygg and Köhler (2015) remind us, this is not simply about doing the lecture outdoors. On a field trip, information and sources of knowledge are more often related to seeing, hearing, and experiencing than to reading. It is tempting to see field trips as the negation of classroom teaching: here we do something we *don't* normally do. The danger with this view, however, is that we might ignore important relations between the theoretical education in the classroom and the empirical focus on the field trips.

Although the same geography courses might include both theoretical discussions and field trips, the relations between them are seldom reflected upon in the literature. The lack of focus on this topic might have a simple, practical explanation, as teachers are focused on just “getting it done” – organizing transport, arranging meetings with people, getting the group of students to the site, and not least safely back home! Little capacity is

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then left for theorizing around the field trips. But this might also be due to a lack of theoretical and academic focus on the topic itself.

According to Anđelković, Dedjanski & Pejic, fieldwork promotes active learning models in real contexts, in which, they argue, “a student is able to see the connection between theory and real life” (Anđelković et al., 2017, p. 3; see also Fuller, 2012). I argue that this is a *potential* with field trips, but not something that comes automatically. And whether this potential is realized depends upon the teachers themselves, and how the field trips and courses are organized. This paper seeks to contribute in this respect.

This paper uses the term ‘field trips’¹ fairly broadly, as an organized journey away from the normal educational site, where one aims to study something that is – one way or another – located at this place. In terms of time, the trip might range from hours to days to weeks. Spatially, it could be anywhere; field trips within human geography might, for example, go to glaciers, forests, farming landscapes, or megacities. This paper will focus on field trips to urban environments.

In terms of how we can theoretically understand field trips, I draw upon Henri Lefebvre when arguing for the benefits of understanding the built environment as *concrete abstractions*. In terms of how to *make* abstractions, I draw upon Bertell Ollman. In terms of how to actually incorporate theory into field trips, I draw partly on theoretical discussions on abstractions, partly on structured interviews with seven professors and associate professors in Sweden with vast experience in conducting field trips in urban environments, and partly on personal experiences from teaching at universities for over a decade.

This paper argues that a better incorporation of theory and field trips can potentially improve both the field trips and the teaching of theory. Field trips have the potential to decodify theory and make it easier to understand – especially for students who struggle to engage with theory and prefer case studies and empirical work.

This paper will end by offering some hands-on tips to other teachers. Several of my informants emphasized the need to prepare the theory in *advance*, but from my experience, I have also had success with discussing theory *after* the field trip. I suggest thinking concretely about these things through five-steps: i) long-term pre-work, ii) pre-work days before, iii) work during the actual field trip, iv) post-work days after, and v) longer-term post-work.

Field trips, human geography and theory

”To say that fieldwork represents the hallmark of geography, its very heart, would most likely not be disputed.” (Allen & Barbour, 2016, p. 479)

Fieldwork is frequently perceived as fundamental and definitive of geography: as an integral component of the geography degree (Fuller, 2012) and crucial in making the discipline distinct from other subjects (Nairn et al., 2000). This strong tradition of field trips within human geographies follows partly from the subject matter: it makes sense to have a look at the earth, the landscapes, the city, etc. that is being studied. Field trips are a central teaching method in both natural and human geography (Allen & Barbour, 2016), and geography is often described as “a science of synthesis, a science linking humanity and environment and creating a bridge between the social and natural sciences” (Holt-Jensen, 1999, p. 2). The need to go into the field can even be found in

the etymology of the word “geography”: from Greek, literally meaning “earth description.” The focus on field trips, field studies, and excursions within geography also come – relatedly – from the discipline’s historical legacy. From the first developments of “geography” in ancient Greek, to the Arab geographer Al Muqaddasi, a “pioneer of fieldwork” in the eighth century (Holt-Jensen, 1999, p. 20); to the modern schools such as Carl Sauer – see his oft-quoted presidential address to the American Association of Geographers in 1956: “the principal training of geographers should come, wherever possible, by doing fieldwork” (as cited in Fuller, 2012, p. 7) – and Vidal de la Blache and the French School of Geopolitics; and finally to development planning, where “field study [...] was basic to [Patrick] Geddes’ teaching” (Holt-Jensen, 1999, p. 54; see also Peet, 1998; Simonsen & Hansen, 2004; Fuller et al., 2006; Fuller, 2012; Fagan & Sturm, 2015; Trygg & Köhler, 2015).

Field trips have been analyzed from feminist perspectives (Nairn, 2002), as a potential flagship in the context of internationalism (Glass, 2015; Nairn et al., 2000), and as *experiential learning* (cf. Golubchikov, 2015, p. 144). Common themes that emerge from fieldwork – according to Fuller et al. (2006) and their international perspective – is: “providing first-hand experience of the real world, whichever part of the world the students are in; skills development (transferable and technical); and social benefits” (Fuller et al., 2006, p. 89). Finally, students often describe field studies as “fun” and “memorable and effective learning experience[s]” (Fagan & Sturm, 2015, p. 482).

Anđelković et al. (2017) examined 215 students and concluded that the students recognized and positively evaluated benefits of fieldwork in terms of its pedagogical effects with regards to “didactic-methodical aspects such as immediate contact with objects of knowledge; interdisciplinary study of a problem; application of various methods of teaching; enhancement of motivation for learning; improvement of social relations, and development of skills necessary for fieldwork” (Anđelković et al., 2017, p. 1). Field trips are considered a specific type of learning that encourages a better development of social integration and social relations both between students and between students and professors. This arguably develops relations of trust, understanding, and cooperation (Anđelković et al., 2017; Fuller, 2012). Field studies are often considered to be about “observing” (Martin, 2003). It facilitates reflective and active learning, and comes with new experiences and different impressions, and results in greater interest and better motivation from the students (see also Trygg & Köhler, 2015).

Just because field trips have a long and fascinating history does not mean changes have not occurred over the years. Anđelković et al. (2017, p. 1) argue that, due to new international relations, such as the Bologna Process, and in accordance with the constructivist paradigm in education that places students at the center of educational processes, there is a need to further improve the quality of fieldwork and increase its share in the curriculum. Golubchikov (2015, p. 143) argues that the changing roles of teachers have also impacted field studies: moving away from the old-school instrumental version of knowledge and technocratic rationality and efficiency, and towards a transmitter of knowledge and a facilitator of learning, encouraging more self-managed and self-reflective students and learning processes (see also McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Mann, 2006, p. 179). Further, due to changes in university teaching, Anđelković et al. argue that fieldwork has “gained importance as an integral part of the ethos and culture of geography study programmes” (Anđelković et al., 2017, p. 3).

There is little focus in the literature, however, on how theories can/should play a part in field trips. Fuller et al. (2006) mention briefly that fieldwork might also contribute to making theory clearer but do not elaborate on how or why. Nonetheless, I think this is indeed the case, and will in this paper contribute to developing such an argument.

One recent approach that *is* theory-laden, and has received substantial attention, is Golubchikov's take on the "feel-trip." The "feel-trip" speaks to a recent trend that stresses:

"[...] students should not be told what to think or value, but rather taught to develop the skills and knowledge to analyse critically their preconceived perception of the economy, society, environment and politics". (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 145)

Building upon recent focus on affect in geographies, Golubchikov suggests including affective learning in field studies – thus a call for what he calls "feel studies": an "explicitly more-than-cognitive conception of field-based teaching and learning" (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 144). Golubchikov argues this is important for both creating more stimulating learning conditions "with lasting effects on students' imaginaries and thinking" and triggering "reflective and critical skills for potentially a more responsible and ethical operation of knowledge" (ibid). Through "feel-trips," Golubchikov argues, learner's growth should be facilitated "by means of, but also within, the learner's system of feelings, values, appreciation, motivations and attitudes" (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 145).

Such emphasis on affection is currently rather widespread. Anđelković et al. (2017) argue that while the affective domain is almost neglected in teaching in general (thanks, they say, to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956)), the quality of fieldwork is reflected primarily in promoting learning outcomes in the affective domain. Through blending affective, experiential, and critical learning by doing "feel-trips," Golubchikov (2015) argues one can develop an active understanding of geographical concepts. I argue this approach certainly has interesting aspects, but also clear limitations.

The epistemological assumption behind a "feel-trip" is that deep knowledge is something that comes (at least partly) from the student's own experiences, feelings, and emotions. Encouraging the student to reflect upon what they have learned in relation to their own experiences is absolutely crucial. Trygg and Köhler (2015) even describe the acquisition of our own experiences as the "hallmark of excursions." As Golubchikov also acknowledges, affect is obviously present on any fieldtrip, and in everyday life in general: "The onus of a feel-trip is a more explicit recognition that affect is closely linked to experiential field-based activities" (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 155).

With this approach, there is a danger of underestimating the social role of knowledge production. Theories – or the way we understand the world – neither come out of thin air nor emerge (only) from people's experiences (Sayer, 2000). To a large degree, theories need to be taught. But not necessarily in a classroom environment; learning theory also comes with activities like reading, listening, writing, and thinking. It is often the case that it only makes sense to criticize theories after one has learned them – this critique, however, can be very much based on personal experiences and so forth. As mentioned above, the "feel-trips" approach argued that students should "not be told what to think or value," but rather "taught to develop the skills and knowledge to analyse critically their preconceived perception" (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 145). But where do such "preconceived perceptions" come from in the first place? We need to pay careful attention to the power

relations that always come with knowledge production. University teachers need to be conscious about, and reflect critically on, how theories are (re)produced – and their role in such processes.

Following critical realism, we can argue that explanations and arguments developed through decades of intellectual discussion cannot simply be “felt” or “experienced” by the student (Billing & Stigendal, 1994; Danemark et al., 2002; Ollman, 2003; Peet, 1998; Sayer, 1992, 2000). Knowing a theory is here a precondition before “feeling” or “experiencing” a critique of that particular theory. Our starting point should be how students can learn theories and theoretical thinking *while also* being critical and skeptical to new and old knowledge and theories. One way of thinking relations between theory and empirical knowledge is through abstractions.

Field trips as concrete abstractions

There are several ways of thinking through/with abstractions. In this paper, I will discuss approaches by Henri Lefebvre and Bertell Ollman. Drawing upon Hegel and Marx, Lefebvre argued that space is a *concrete abstraction* (Lefebvre, 1991). For Hegel, the abstract is impoverished, one-sided, while the concrete is embedded in a variety of relations (Hegel, 1808/1966). It is for this reason Lefebvre (1991, p. 289) claims that there is “violence intrinsic” to abstraction. Still, we have no choice but to work with abstractions, as there are all kinds of phenomena, connections, and relations that cannot be grasped in any other way.

Lefebvre draws explicitly on Marx’s discussions on labor, which for Marx (1976) consists of two aspects. On one side, the specific labor of particular workers (i.e. concrete labor – a productive activity of a definite kind and exercised with a definite aim), and on the other the non-specific “abstract labor”, (i.e. the expenditure of human labor in general) (Marx, 1976).

Abstract labor is true – has effects – but only becomes “true in practice” through concrete labor. This is the core of concrete abstraction. Lefebvre (1991) defined concrete as abstraction that concretizes and realizes itself socially in social practices. Abstractions are made every day through social processes. Marx’s concrete abstractions becoming true in practice were developed by Lefebvre (1991) into the claim that the space of capitalism is an abstraction that *became true* in social, economic, political, and cultural practice.

Marx’s discussions on abstract and concrete labor – and concrete abstraction as a “sensual-suprasensual thing” – inspired Lefebvre to theorize the paradoxical character of capitalist space as both abstract and concrete, simultaneously homogeneous and fragmented (Lefebvre, 1991; Marx, 1976; Stanek, 2008).

Likewise, the built environment that we meet on field trips is sensual – concrete and physical structures – as well as abstract – processes and relations. We can touch the building and see the concrete, but there is no way we can see the capital-labor relation that is crucial for building and maintaining the building.

We can see certain buildings, but we cannot see the “the built environment” as an abstraction. We can see housing estates, but not “the real estate.” We can see roads, cars, trains, and airports, but not “the infrastructure.” We can find and interview owners of buildings, but we cannot interview the abstraction “capital.” By talking about the built environment in this way we might get a glimpse of it as both sensual and suprasensual,

abstract, and concrete. In order to understand the city as real estate, infrastructure, capital, etc., we need to think with abstractions. The challenge thus becomes to understand *simultaneously* the buildings and the built environment; the owners and capital; cars and infrastructure: to see abstractions in their concrete – and the concrete as abstractions.

Working with concrete abstractions becomes an important tool for revealing spatial fetishism. For Marx (1976), commodity fetishism is what hides the social relations (e.g., labor–capital relations) that exist in commodities. When we see a building, we immediately see architecture, façades and physical structures; we don't see the social relations that constitute the building. Through working with buildings as concrete abstractions, we can go one step further in trying to reveal this spatial fetishism.

Accepting and identifying abstractions at a theoretical level is one thing. Another, and perhaps more demanding task, is to find ones that are both fruitful and true. Mitchell (1995, p. 109) makes a distinction between “good” abstractions (which are rational or concrete) and “bad” abstractions (which are chaotic and either overbroad or too narrow) (see also Sayer, 1992). Rational, good, or useful abstractions, following Mitchell, are “firmly rooted in specifiable processes and denote an internal coherence” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 109).

It is obviously not as simple as bringing students in front of buildings and declaring that here we have concrete abstractions! We also need to *make* the abstractions. One fruitful and relatively practical way of going forward here is with Ollman (2003) and his three modes of abstractions (on the relationship between Ollman and critical realism, see Ollman, 2003, ch. 10; Holgersen, 2012). The first mode is abstraction of *extension*, where boundaries are set both temporally and spatially. For example, we might visit a place and talk about processes that unfold in that place at that time: but in order to do so we need to pretend as if the rest of the world stands still – we are *making* boundaries that actually do not exist. The second is levels of *generality*. For example, one single building, like the Turning Torso in Malmö, might be i) Turning Torso, ii) building in Malmö, iii) a “signal building,” iv) “outstanding architecture,” v) built environment, vi) housing and offices, vii) real estate, viii) capital. Following Hegel, we can distinguish between three moments: “universality” (or generality), “particularity” and “singularity” (cf. Stanek, 2008, p. 64). We can discuss the building at any of these levels of generalization, but the crucial challenge remains to be conscious about which level we are operating at. The third mode of abstraction comes as *vantage points*. This is the fact that we see different things and investigate reality differently from different perspectives. The vantage point, “colors everything that falls into it, establishing order, hierarchy, and priorities, distributing values, meanings, and degrees of relevance, and asserting a distinctive coherence between the parts” (Ollman, 2003, p. 100).

Discussions on method

In this section I will outline and discuss the two main methods I have combined in this paper: personal experiences from holding and organizing field trips, especially in Bergen, Norway, and Malmö, Sweden; and structured interviews with seven established academics who all have vast experience with conducting and organizing field trips (on combining methods, see e.g., Danemark et al., 2002, ch. 7; Yin, 2009).

Personal experiences

Using one's own personal experiences as a method has become increasingly accepted and acknowledged over the last decades. This has been especially emphasized and developed within feminist geography (see McDowell, 1992; Moss, 2002). It is a valuable approach as it highlights and emphasizes the researcher's subject position in knowledge production (something that would otherwise be present, but hidden). One danger, however, is the tendency to be unconsciously biased or to simply assume that what is working for me must work for everyone (McDowell, 1992; Moss, 2002; Nairn, 2002; Winchester, 2000; Yin, 2009).

Over the years I have been involved in field trips in various forms: I have invited other guides, I have been a guide on other teacher's courses/classes, and I have been a guide on trips I have organized myself. I have conducted around 15 guided tours in Malmö since 2014 (some of these I have organized myself, when teaching at Lund University and Linnaeus University), but in most cases, I have been invited as a guide. In Malmö, I have guided field trips for undergraduates, master students, and on courses for doctoral students. In Bergen, I was course coordinator with Kari Anne Drangslund for 3 years between 2015 and 2017 on an urban geography course at master's level on which we had a one day field trip every year (with some students joining who were on "professional development": planners or architects that wanted further geographical knowledge). In 2018, I organized a four-day fieldtrip to Borlänge and Falun in Sweden when working at Uppsala University. Finally, in Malmö, Borlänge/Falun and Bergen I also have experience with inviting people to talk along a planned route.

It is my experiences from Bergen and Malmö which will be drawn from most in this paper. The two cities have a couple of significant similarities: both are coastal cities, and both are large cities in their respective countries with 275 000 (Bergen) and 316 000 (Malmö) inhabitants. Their urban geographies, however, come with some substantial differences: Bergen is traditionally more known for trade, Malmö for industrial production; Bergen has a university very centrally located (both geographically and mentally) in the city (academic activity has taken place in Bergen since 1153), while Malmö's university college ("högskola") opened as late as 1998, and only received full university status in 2018. However, both cities are currently socially segregated and are trying to promote themselves as environmentally friendly and knowledge cities (on Bergen, see Drangslund & Holgersen, 2008; Danielsen, 2006; on Malmö see Baeten, 2012; Holgersen, 2014a; Mukhtar-Landgren, 2012; Pries, 2017).

In Malmö, I have experience organizing and guiding field trips in several parts of the city. Often the focus has been on Western Harbour – an old industrial site close to the city center that was developed into a "post-industrial," "environmentally friendly" city district, designed for the relatively affluent – but I have also guided and organized field trips in more working-class areas like Möllevången, Augustenborg and Rosengård (see Holgersen, 2017). On these outings, I was often asked to give a two-hour lecture before the field trip, but no seminar afterward.

In Bergen, Drangslund and I were responsible for the course so were in charge of planning where to go, who to meet, how to link the trips to course literature, etc. Here, where we could follow the students throughout the whole course, combining theory and the field trip was something we explicitly worked on. However, when I was interacting

and having conversations with students and others concerning these issues at the time, I did not know that I was later going to write academically on this topic.

The paper is therefore written from a tutor's point of view. I have not interviewed students about *their* views and experiences, and I am not discussing the matter from the students' perspective, but this would certainly be an interesting approach for future studies.

Methodological discussions: structural interviews

I have also conducted structured interviews with seven professors or associate professors – five men and two women – at five different institutions in Sweden. This has been important for getting better insight into, and an overview of, how other teachers think about the relationship between excursions² and theory. I chose these seven interviewees as I knew they all have extensive experiences with urban excursions. Six are human geographers and one is professor in The Built Environment. They were told their answers would be anonymized. The interviews were done by email, which has the disadvantage of not facilitating discussion and interaction as personal meetings can. However, this is less of a problem with structured interviews compared to e.g., semi-structured interviews. One advantage is that the interviewees can spend longer reflecting upon their answers (on interviewing as method within human geography, see Dunn, 2000; Kitchin & Tate, 2000; Yin, 2009).

The interviewees were asked about i) whether they thought it was important to combine theoretical thinking and excursions in urban studies (If yes, why? If no, why not?), ii) whether they had any thoughts about how to integrate theoretical aspects into their excursions (If yes: how? If no: why not?), and iii) if they had any thoughts on how we can help students “see” theoretical aspects in the built environment, or in the people/informants we might meet during the excursions?

Findings from interviews: combining theory and field trips

All but one of my informants argued that it is crucial to combine theoretical thinking and excursions: informant, #7 problematized the concept of “theory” altogether. Some stressed this importance more boldly than others. One (#1) argued that field trips are “an important teaching tool” and “key elements in the development of geographical knowledge”. Informant #6 considered field studies to be “absolutely important.” Another (#2) argued that urban studies are “one of the fields where it is possible to more or less directly relate theories and concepts to the physical environment”, but that this “usually requires that we “dig” a little below the visible surface.” One informant (#3) claimed that there are possibilities for “deep knowledge,” and opportunities to “abstract” – by which they mean lifting discussions from the particular examples – if one does manage to tie together excursions and theory.

All informants argued, in different ways, that the topic is important, but diverged when suggesting strategies for *how* to integrate theory and field trips. For example, providing hand-outs which include historical maps and key statistics in order to “highlight historical developments and provide a ‘deeper’ impression of the current ‘surface’” (#2), and: “Like all teaching, an excursion takes time to prepare and I personally often use a handout (maps,

statistics, brief descriptions, i.e. a written guide) that aims at supporting the student's learning process and also offers extra material to support the more visual impressions that a student collects while walking or seeing through a bus window" (#5). Some informants also mentioned that they discuss theory in class before the excursion and then make references back to theory (e.g., #1, #3, #5). According to informant #1 it is important to "be clear about what kind of theories we introduce in class", then "make it clear at the excursion what we try to illustrate". But the informant also said this is not easy and acknowledge that they have no conscious strategy or method on how to do this.

Informant #3 argued that combining theory and excursions is not that difficult, with the built environment offering clear manifestations of urban processes and visions and power relations. However, they also stressed the need to familiarize students with the concepts and theories *before* going on the excursions. Two informants (#1 and #3) mentioned that excursions might help improve theoretical knowledge, as "some students are more receptive to practical examples" (#1), and excursions "makes the theory richer and more relevant" (#3). Excursions might broaden the students understanding of how concepts can be used and applied in various contexts.

Informant #2 has organized excursions on gentrification and points to different ways of learning – or "seeing": "where cultural forces can in this respect often be "read" more or less directly, whereas underlying economic and political forces can be explained (e.g., with help of key statistics). Other aspects of urban change, such as processes of "gating", can often be identified more directly (although students typically don't think of it before it is pointed out)." The informant here pointed towards different learning processes: something can be seen directly (cultural expressions), something must be explained (underlying economic and political forces), while some aspects ("gating") can be identified more directly but normally need to be pointed out to the students.

Informant #4 argued that to find an article that "specifically deals with the neighborhood you will look at helps a lot because there the built environment is placed in some theoretical framework". This seems plausible, as students will be able to see the direct linkages between concrete places and an academic paper. However, it cannot be guaranteed that articles or academic papers have been written about the site one wants to visit. However, this might also be an easy (and unsatisfactory) way out for teachers who not are willing to do the hard work themselves of combining theories with empirical investigations.

Some informants (#1, #4, #6) stressed the need to combine theory and excursions, but explicitly stated they do not have a clear idea of *how* they do it: "Don't know is the honest answer" (#4). Informant #1 explained they thought it was hard to explain how to do it, and argued that it is a matter of experience: "after 20 years of doing excursions I am doing it intuitively ... Over the years you can see what works. But then things change and you need to find new examples. That is also what makes it fun and challenging" (#1).

Informant #5 pointed toward good preparations and the need for teachers to be knowledgeable: the "more [one] knows about a place and its history, the easier it is to tell a coherent story that combines material objects (buildings, architecture) with a sense of the socioeconomic context that has shaped it into its current features." Informant #6 also pointed to the need for preparation, and argued that connecting theories and landscapes is not easy, and needs to be "learned". Informant #5 further argued that "bringing in other (local) voices such as people working in a neighborhood, residents, activists etc. also adds to the experience and makes an excursion more lively and interesting".

Informant #6 suggested that students should be active during the excursion, not only passive receivers of information. Ways of being active include, for example, intervening in patterns, walking on their own, interviewing people, formulating questions from a specific context, and so forth.

Informant #4 argued that if “*you don’t see theory in the built environment during excursions there must be something wrong with the theory*”! This is a bold statement. The informant followed up with claiming that theoretical parts of urban studies should “*not be mobilized for the sake of it, it should not be imposed on reality and then see how it fits in. [...] Theory is our slave to help us understand reality. I think you can do a perfect excursion without theory. But you can’t do theory without anchoring it in reality, testing it, falsifying it.*”

One informant (#7) stood out as the only one problematizing the concept of theory. By doing so, the informant also exemplified how important their view on theory is. They questioned the whole idea of combining theory and excursions – “*we are theoretical*” all the time – and rightly pointed to the fact that theory is a highly disputed term that has a multitude of meanings.

Analysis: field trips and theory – facing concrete abstraction

All interviewees agreed that theory is crucial in field trips, except informant #4 who argued that one can do a “*perfect excursion without theory*”. Informant #4 stressed the need to discuss “concepts” (rather than necessarily theories), but we can question why the work of theories (so central in classroom teaching) should not also be applied in the field. In this respect, I don’t agree with informant #4. In this section, I will show how their view excludes much of the potential that exists in the field trip format.

Informant #7 has a very different view on the matter: “*when ‘theoretical aspects’, or just the theory-talk, are being brought forth it so often comes with a reproduction of an onto-epistemological divide that I do not subscribe to in principle.*” Another view that questions the onto-epistemological divide is constructivism (see Anđelković et al., 2017, and parts of; Golubchikov (2015) affective learning through “feel-trip”).

In contrast to ignoring the need for theory (informant #4) or rejecting the distinction between theory and “the field” – between epistemology and ontology – I will here show that working with critical realism and concrete abstractions are fruitful.³ Below I will draw on my personal experiences and reflect upon field trips in terms of extensions and vantage points.

Abstraction as extension: (start) revealing spatial fetishism

One example of abstraction as extension, which I have used explicitly when guiding field trips in Malmö, is the difference between production-based and consumption-based ways of measuring greenhouse gas emissions. Here, the former only measures the emissions produced in one specific territorial area, while the latter measures emissions where commodities are consumed as opposed to where they are produced. The Western Harbour in Malmö has a global reputation as an “eco city” and “sustainable neighborhood” (Jönsson & Holgersen, 2017). Whether this reputation is deserved or not depends on how we extend and generalize the urban space. If we only focus on the emissions deriving directly from this neighborhood, the numbers are low, but if we include

consumption we see a very different picture: the city of Malmö has 204% higher emissions if one uses consumption – rather than production-based numbers; and this number is even greater in Western Harbour where the average income is higher than Malmö as a whole (Holgersen & Malm, 2015).

In this way, working at different levels of abstraction and always stressing temporal-spatial context might help us reveal spatial fetishism. If one stands in front of a building with solar panels, one can easily point to these and argue they contribute to mitigating climate change. But if one knows the average income of those living in the building, the class character of the city districts, distinctions between consumption- and production-based ways of measuring emissions, etc., the story about the building within a warming world can be told very differently.

When planning, organizing, and conducting field trips, we always choose what to emphasize. On the surface, in Western Harbour one can see green roofs that will absorb surface water. But given the geographical context, we can also argue that green roofs are less important here because being located right on the sea front means surface water can simply be transported straight into the sea. On the surface, one can focus on the green façade and solar panels. But one can also point to the fact that such façades in several places in Western Harbour hide carparking halls. On the surface, one can see eco-shops. But from statistics on average income – and therefore general consumption patterns – we can assume that people living here consume far above the city average.

Another way of working with abstraction as extensions is through knowing which activities have taken place here. Until recently there was industrial production at Western Harbour. From this, one can emphasize how noisy industries needed to leave the area to make way for “sustainable” housing and offices (this is the story most often told in Malmö). But one can also emphasize that what was actually produced most recently at Western Harbour were components for wind turbines and railways – items clearly needed in a “sustainable future.” One can also choose between emphasizing the high ambitions that many of the buildings at Western Harbour had in terms of energy efficiency – or the fact that these were never met (Holgersen, 2014b; Jönsson & Holgersen, 2017).

I have also conducted field trips in Malmö where we have visited not only Western Harbour, but also Rosengård, which is a poor and stigmatized city district with a relatively high density of people of color (see Derakhti & Baeten, 2020; Holgersen, 2012, 2014a; Ristilammi, 1994; Rodenstedt, 2014). After leaving the seaside and the affluent Western Harbour, where houses have solar panels, the architecture is “exceptional” and stores offer a multitude of “ecological” products, Rosengård is a sharp contrast, with its characteristic high rise buildings built during Sweden’s million program.⁴

However, the residents of Rosengård have much lower carbon footprints than those of Western Harbour (Holgersen, 2017). In this respect, and beyond all “city branding” and “image building” of Western Harbour, we can say that Rosengård is more environmentally friendly than Western Harbour. This fundamentally clashes with the image one often has of “environmentally friendly places” being “white and affluent” (see Bradley, 2009) and has certainly been an eye-opener for a few students when we stand in one of Malmö’s poorest and most stigmatized city districts and I claim that *this* is one of the most environmentally friendly neighborhoods in Malmö.

Field trips can both help to reveal spatial fetishism, or reproduce the hegemonic view on a space (i.e. the one often produced in collaboration between the municipality and local capital, see also Listerborn, 2017). Since the city of Malmö branded Western Harbour a world-leading ecological city district, many people have come to see the area: at most, the municipality has guided some 10.000–12.000 official visitors each year (Holgersen & Malm, 2015). Such tours, organized by the municipality, differ from the field trips discussed in this paper but they do nonetheless provide both knowledge production and guiding in the built environment. I think it is fair to say that the guided tours from the municipality differ from my guided tour in the area in the way they relate to extension and generality as ways of abstracting and theorizing.

Inviting representatives from the municipality onto a field trip tour might be valuable in many respects. But it is also crucial to neither take the information they provide as *per se* truths, nor to simply *a priori* assume that what the representative will say is a lie that needs to be exposed. For many teachers in human geography, urban studies and urban planning, it is important to both collaborate with municipalities *while also* maintaining critical distance. Various actors – including the municipality – have certain interests to defend, which is something one needs to be aware of.

In order to reveal spatial fetishism in field trips, we first need to know stories of the place: average income, owner structure, planning processes, energy efficiency in houses, numbers of cars per capita in the area, etc. Then, this must be combined with more abstract thinking: how to measure emissions, spatiality of class, the city's entrepreneurial activity, city branding, questions of ideology and greenwashing, as well as questions of race/racism/whiteness, gender, and much more. Finally, then, we need to learn how various abstractions and theories might give us very different information and knowledge about a place.

Vantage points: People as concrete abstractions

Ollman (2003) third way of making abstraction – vantage points – is also crucial in terms of field trips. Here I will stress the potential benefits that might come from meeting people – e.g., neighborhood activists, developers, politicians, planners, public managers, architects, historians, “experts,” academics, etc. – during the field trip (something that was also mentioned by informant #5). Field trips can be organized in different ways; they can also be a one-person show from start to finish. In Bergen, however, we always met various people during the field trips.

The first year we covered different “cases” in the city by meeting and listening to three different people at different sites: first a representative for the municipality working in a traditionally poor area with some recent high-end developments; second, a representative for a neighborhood association that had worked against real estate speculation in their area for many years; and finally a planner from the municipality working on establishing a new light-rail track through central Bergen.

The second year, we met four people that had direct relations to the same place: first a planner from the municipality; then a representative from the municipality working on a pedestrian- and bicycle-bridge in the area; third a professor from University of Bergen that had been working on the area for years; and finally we met a representative from the

neighborhood organization. This year we did not meet private developers, something the students commented on.

The third year, we returned to the plan from the first year and looked at various places; first we met a developer of the high-end developments; then we met the same neighborhood representative as the first year; and finally we met architects from a private firm who worked on the extensions of the Bergen light railway tracks. In this respect new “roles” were included into the course: architects and consultants.

Overall then, on the first year in Bergen, we met two people from the municipality and no one from private sector. In the third year, we met no one from the municipality, and two people from the private sector. This difference radically changed the character of the field trip. It is possible to think that one of each would be preferable, but due to all kinds of circumstances this was not always achievable.

The people one meets along a route will all see the world from different vantage points; and these vantage points are often also radically different from that of researchers and academics. What they say and how they speak can and should be discussed with the students afterwards in terms of discussing these people both as individuals *and* as representatives of organizations, interests, classes and groups, and so on. This opens important (theoretical and methodological) discussions on representation, positionality, subject positions, individuals versus groups, interests, and so on and so forth. For example, the developers we met were always men, which also opened possibilities to discuss the extremely gendered character of land ownership and the construction sectors (Staffansson Pauli, 2014). We had several interesting conversations in the group after the field trip on individuals and their roles: e.g., how much would it matter if we met a different person with similar interests?

In this way, we discussed not only the built environment, but also people in terms of concrete abstraction. People are thus representatives and manifestations of theories – although never reduced to theories (after all, they are *people*). But positionality and vantage points open vast possibilities to discuss how roles, interests, and positions are articulated in urban planning and development.

Five steps towards combining theory and field trips

In this section, I will suggest five practical steps on how to integrate theory and field trip. As geography courses with field trips vary greatly – sometimes field trips are the main component of a course, in other cases, it is simply a few hours at the beginning, middle, or end of the course – it should be clear that these five steps cannot all be implemented directly in all these different contexts. Nonetheless, I hope teachers, course coordinators, and field guides can draw some inspiration from one or several of the steps in order to improve their own way of thinking with theory and field trips.

(1) *Long-term pre-work*

Some of the interviewees mentioned the need for preparations before the field trip. In this paper, I draw a further distinction between preparations that are done months ahead, and days before, the field trip. When planning the course and the curriculum, teachers should already be reflecting dialectically on where to go on field trips and which theories they

should thus use to teach the course. This does not mean one should teach theory one is not familiar with, or visit places that are irrelevant for any other reason than a (theoretical) link to theory. Rather, thinking this *dialectically* from an early point might improve the processes and develop the connection.

Beyond thinking about *which* theories to teach, students also benefit from being introduced to thinking with abstractions. Training students to, for example, think with Lefebvre's (concrete) abstractions or Ollman's three modes of abstraction can improve their ability to grasp connections between theory and the built environment during the field trip. However, this needs to be planned and introduced at an early stage.

(1) *Pre-work: day(s) before the field trip*

At an absolute minimum, the cases, places and people one is going to visit in class must be discussed before going on the field trip (unless the surprise element of not knowing where they are going is in itself a pedagogical aim). Precisely how much information one should share with the students is a balancing act. On one side, the more information the students have, the better the questions that can be raised during the field trips. On the other, teachers should be careful not to simply repeat the same story that will be presented on the field trip.

Theories/concepts should not be introduced on the "last day" before the trip, but it might be fruitful to remind the students about central theories that they could have in the back of their heads during the field trip. I argue that it is not enough to simply explain that "this" theory is what we will see in the field. If this has not been introduced previously, it is absolutely time to talk to the students about relations between theories and the "field". One way of doing so is through different abstractions. Teachers should also tell students how some theories might be wrong; preparing the students for different and conflicting theories might also be fruitful.

(1) *The field trip*

There are plenty of ways of conducting the actual field trip, however, here I stress the advantages of meeting various people along the route. If the field trip spans several days, there should be no problem scheduling such meetings. Even if the field trip is a one-day activity, this is doable, as we did in Bergen. For example, if each stop is about an hour (including presentation and questions) and one adds time to travel between sites as well as lunch, there could be three or four stops on the route in one day. Meeting different people can make it easier to think theoretically about people, the built environment, and representation. This opportunity vanishes normally when the teacher personally guides the whole field trip. However, having the same guide throughout the day does leave more possibilities to "talk theory" and remind the students of different theories during the actual field trip.

Some interviewees mentioned techniques that can be mobilized during the field trip in order to include the students. One interviewee suggested handing out different kind of maps or conducting short exercises along the route (perhaps make personal maps?), another that the students could interview people, come up with questions for later, or even walk on their own for a time. These are great ideas. If the field trip goes to the same

place over different years, the students can also take pictures of specific places and then compare with pictures of the same places taken by previous students.⁵ This might open up discussions on representation, and how things change – and don't change.

Another exercise that can be conducted during the field trip, which relates to abstractions, is to stand in front of specific buildings and ask the students to think with different vantage points: how will this building look if you imagine seeing it as a planner from the municipality; as the owner; as a real estate agent; as a real estate speculator; as a neighbor; as a construction worker who built it; or as a homeless person in the area?

(1) *Post-work: day(s) after the field trip*

Several of the informants emphasized the need for good preparations before doing the field trip, but no one pointed to something that I have found very helpful. Based on my own experiences, I want to stress the importance of discussing theory *after* the field trip.

On one course in Bergen, the field trip had to be conducted very early in the course making it hard to prepare the students and discuss theory beforehand. It was this year that I fully discovered the possibilities of discussing theory after the field trip – and it is definitely something that needs to be further explored. Glass also calls for future research on precisely this: “The capacity for student-centered learning approaches to influence geographic knowledge formation *after* the field course” (Glass, 2015, p. 488, my emphasis).

In Bergen, we always arranged seminars shortly after the field trips. Students were told to write down some reflections that also related to theory ahead of the seminar. The 1–2 pages they wrote then functioned as a basis for discussion (these short texts were not produced for any other reason, than simply “forcing” the students to think ahead of the seminar). In the seminar, we discussed the empirical observations during the field trip, and the explicit concepts/theories we had discussed during the course (or during previous courses or elsewhere) in relation to the field trip.

The seminar is a great opportunity to talk about theory and field trips at a deeper level, for example, seeing the buildings, processes and peoples in terms of concrete abstractions. If different people talked along the route: why did the presenters say what they did?, how did they (not) represent their “position”?, and how do they (not) reflect theory in (and beyond) the course? This is also an opportunity to reflect on what one did *not* see during the field trip. Which theories did *not* fit the case? Is theory “wrong,” or must it simply be better grasped at different levels of generalization/extension, etc. (cf. Ollman).

I have not yet used Ollman's three ways of abstracting – extension, generality and vantage points – explicitly in these seminars, but it is certainly something I will try as soon as I get the opportunity.

(1) *Long-term post-work*

The field trip does not end when the first seminar after the excursion is finished. As the group now has collective experiences, teachers should use these valuable resources throughout the course. Both when teaching theory, and when discussing other cases, one has now a fantastic opportunity to refer back to the common experiences from the field and use these as examples. The students have, hopefully, not only had a great time,

found new inspiration, and gained more knowledge about certain places and theories/concepts, but also an understanding of how “concrete” abstract theories are – and how “abstract” the concrete buildings can be.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how to combine theory with field trips. Despite the fact that these two elements often constitute main components of the same geography course, there is not much academic literature that discusses the relationship between them. My seven interviewees also argued that this was an important issue but did not have a thought-through approach on *how* to do this.

In response, I have articulated a concrete way forward, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, I have suggested working with concrete abstractions, while practically I have suggested thinking through five steps that I hope will be of inspiration for other teachers.

I want to end this paper by pointing to informant #5 and their argument that preparing and organizing excursions *takes time*. I second this: thinking through how to combine theory and field trips is fairly time-consuming. But there is no room for short cuts here: if theories and field trips are to be combined successfully, one needs time to reflect upon their relations; one needs to be knowledgeable about the places one visits and the theories one teaches; one needs time to think through how to organize the course; one needs to discuss and reflect after the field trip; one needs to think about how to activate students (e.g., with hand-outs, activities, and questions), and – I argue – that teachers themselves also need to reflect and have a conscious view on what theory actually *is*. Working in this way will not only improve the field trips, but also the teaching of theory.

Notes

1. For a discussion on the distinctions between field trips, field course and fieldwork, see Nairn et al. (2000).
2. In the interview I asked about “excursions” [Swedish *exkursioner*], which is in Swedish used rather interchangeably with *field trips*. I have therefore kept “excursions” in this section on the paper, but this is translated into field trips in rest of the paper.
3. Proponents of Critical Realism often position themselves precisely in opposition to both positivism and constructivism (see Danemark et al., 2002; Sayer, 1992, 2000).
4. On the million program (built between 1965 and 1975), see (Billing & Stigendal, 1994; Blackwell, 2019; Grundström & Molina, 2016).
5. I want to thank Bert Eriksson at Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, for reminding me about this method.

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