

THE CULTURAL DIMENSION IN ACTIVE GEOGRAPHY

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to illustrate briefly the importance of the cultural dimension in geography, and especially, as suggested by the convention programme, in those geographical studies theorised and applied by myself, as well as, I believe, by other colleagues and their younger assistants at the Economics Faculty of the University of Novara, as evidenced by their experience and by their research programmes currently under way.

These experiences may be aggregated into two groupings, which in and of themselves express two methodologies, interconnected and inseparable, of approaching geography and its objectives. These would in fact highlight the importance of the following cultural values: 1) the geographic representation of our world, as produced historically, particularly with regard to regional development; 2) geographic planning, that is to say, voluntary or applied geography. In both the representation and the planning of the territory, culture in its multiple manifestations can be considered both as an object (or component of the territory), as in a true cultural geography, and as a factor (or determinant of the territory). It is on the latter aspect, that is to say on the explicative function of cultural variables, that I wish to treat especially in this brief statement; either because cultural studies have had in recent years increasing influence on other geographies, and particularly in economic geography, or because a so-called cultural “approach” seems to have become fashionable, such that this meeting of the UGI Commission has been entitled “the cultural turning-point in geography”.

2. A cultural “turning-point”: progress or conservation?

The “cultural turning-point” is certainly positive, and can be considered progress, if by this we mean geographers, such as economists and scholars of other social sciences, consider the cultural dimension – or better yet, the widest ideological and cultural dimension of the world, and of the territorial systems or geo-systems in which terrestrial space has been developed by human societies – and attribute to this its due importance in an interpretation of the differentiation of terrestrial space and especially of the geographic variability of competitive advantages and those socio-economic, politico-institutional and physical and ecological development processes.

This generalised attention should also be considered a “turning-point”.

Nevertheless, for many geographers attention on the cultural-ideological dimension of territory is not a recent novelty and, in fact, we should not speak of a “turning point”. This is, I believe, the case of geographers in Piedmont who, as in the author’s case, have not fallen in love with new fashions in geography, without rejecting them, and being in continuity with the thinking of Dino Gribaudi have always considered that: 1) the representation of terrestrial space by each geographer, as by each human being, is largely a reflection of their values, beliefs and knowledge; 2) in addition, the social asset of a territory and the relations of each social group and individual with natural environment-space is also a reflection of their collective and individual values; 3) in particular, macroeconomic development, and that of single companies, the specific themes of economic geography, the special subject of the Gribaudi School seated in the Economics Faculty, is also, and frequently in ample measure, a function of the cultural characters of the society in question. It strikes me, in this regard, that Dino Gribaudi, in the autumn of 1966 when I became his assistant, held a seminar course for the administrative personnel and commercial agents of Ferrero d’Alba (the famous chocolate products firm, which in those years was becoming an international concern), the content of which did not concern the geography of the merchandise (indispensable to avoid selling “ice to the Eskimos and furs to the Congolese” as the saying went at the time) but rather concerned the geography of civilisation, and in particular that geography of non-material cultures, indispensable knowledge for the conduct of business and the avoidance of problems around the world.

Having also considered the cultural-ideological characters of the geographic environment amongst the determining factors of single economic activities and economic development in its entirety for a given socio-spatial community or geo-system, has in any case never led us to N, as unfortunately seems to me to be the case for a significant part of the new geographic fashion N to exalt such attributes to the point of letting us underestimate or actually forget other dimensions of reality for which geographic description and planning cannot be separated. In our conception of territory or a geo-system (Adamo, 2001) such fundamental dimensions (principal subsystems of the geo-system or fundamental sub-categories of geographic environment) are, beyond the cultural-ideological, the socio-economic, the politico-institutional, and the biological-physical dimension (corresponding to the so-called eco-system, distinguishable in its turn in traditional domains or spheres of nature); each of these dimensions of the geo-system is equipped with a certain autonomy, such as to give rise to differing phases in their respective developments (which are notable especially in historic transition periods) or having to intervene in one of these to cause the others to progress (e.g. in the physical order to change the economic sphere, or in the economic to change something political or vice versa, or in the sphere of knowledge and beliefs to remove obstacles to innovation and let the economy and society progress).

What worries me in particular about the new fashionable school of thought which offers an approach it defines as “cultural” is that (at least in the geography proposed by several of its authoritative exponents) it seems to constitute the umpteenth attempt to elude the analysis of social relations, of material interests (both collective and individual) – an analysis from which an explanation of the territorial asset cannot be separated – and then to offer us yet another geography which is apparently neutral, that is to say, justifying of the reality in which we live. It is in fact in these terms that the various important theoretical-methodological contributions of the last forty years have been adopted by many geographers – by those propounding the quantitative revolution, to the behavioural revolution, to information theory or complex theory, and more recently by those advocating geomatic instruments. In a few cases, some have even claimed to redefine the entire body of essential geography on the basis of the new fashionable instrument or approach; rather than seeing in the new contribution an enhancement of the analytical instruments available – to be adapted of course in order to integrate the new method, but not to be discarded.

On the other hand, the increasing importance of cultural variables in the research carried out by economists and economic geographers, especially if it be a positive response to the failure of unreal neo-classical models, and in particular highlights the discovery of territory and geography by many economists and scholars from other analytical social disciplines, is certainly the expression in the academic field of the more general mutation in the commitment and attention of the liberal left from questions of re-distributive justice to questions of identity and individuality (Sayer, 1997). This mutation, increasing, which certainly offers an occasion to re-affirm that geography we can call justifying (or neutral or objective, or better yet, conservative), is favoured on one hand by the significant crisis of the welfare and national state, by the diffusion of free market ideologies (inasmuch as they are anachronistic, to the degree that they presuppose a return to a liberal state which has already failed historically, having led to fascism and nazism and economically, to the “crisis” or crash of 1929); on the other hand by a process of globalisation that is substantially directed by the United States and by the difficulty of the liberal left from other major countries, especially in Europe, to manifest a new foreign policy capable of creating the international conditions to renew the welfare state and provide effective international government to the global economy.

The discovery of territorial identity and individuality by economists not only does not constitute a victory for geographic and cultural studies, but also presents a second risk, beyond that of a conservative or even reactionary geography: the risk of a return to geographies with a certain idiographic fatalism – whose passing should have been accepted by now, since the quantitative revolution, together with the same contrast between the nomotetic approach and the idiographic approach, which is undoubtedly false, as clearly underlined in an important contribution by G. Dematteis (1985), but which has certainly been misunderstood.

Whilst avoiding the risk of an idiographic geography and that of a neutral geography, I believe in the final analysis that to speak of a “cultural approach” is to propose a privileged interpretative key to geographic reality that is intrinsically erroneous; given that either it

means confusing content (object) and analytical method or it means having a reduced conception of the object of geographic representation¹.

Culture (material and non-material, including knowledge and also ideology) is, I repeat, a fundamental dimension (or content or component or sub-system) of the reality that is the object of geographic representation (territories or geo-systems, from the local community to that of the whole world), merits and in fact has its own special geography, cultural geography, just as with other dimensions (physical-biological or ecological, socio-economic and political-institutional) that interact with it. A consideration of its importance in the determination of other dimensions, necessary to represent/interpret geographic reality in its entirety, can not be pushed to the degree of arrogating to itself alone a scientific approach. Although the affirmation of cultural relativism may have allowed many geographers to supersede limited and erroneous views of reality, such as environmental determinism, economic functionalism and positivism in general, assuming the cultural dimension as an “approach” - as proposed by the IGU Commission *ad hoc* - does nothing other than produce other limitations-deformations of reality.

In truth, reading what the such a Commission offers us in presenting this conference, more than a “cultural” approach, we could speak of a subjectivist or idealist approach. This has the merit of rejecting the common foundation of naturalist geographers from the beginning of the 1900’s, as well as that of structuralist, functionalist or systemic geographers from the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s, which all had as the range of their analysis the reality objectively given. Nevertheless, subjectivism (not to mention the simple addition of cultural causality) does not permit us by itself to make great steps forward; insofar as it does not by itself aid comprehension, and perhaps does not even pose the question, to what degree and in what way does subjectivity change with social development, nor to identify the rules of social organisation and territorial development, which constitutes a scientific objective that cannot be renounced, even knowing that such rules are historically relative, and that in each historical phase of every geo-system (or territorial system, including a social system and its physical space). As cultures are largely a condition and effect of the social relations of production and other activities, within the community under consideration and with its external world, it is with the analysis of the changing tendencies of such relations rather than of the cultural differences themselves, that we must concentrate our attention in an active and progressive geography: that is to say, in a geography that captures the reality becoming and plan the changes towards human progress.

3. Cultural values and territorial development in flexible and global capitalism

The current phase of the integration process of the worldwide geo-system, which we call globalisation, is characterised by an impressive growth of the geographic mobility of things, people, capital, information, in short, material and non-material resources, generated by the global strategy of many enterprises, from an increasing liberalisation of markets (imposed or desired) and by an enormous expansion of the means of transportation and especially of new means of communication. Strong and increasing competition deriving from these processes, and no less, by the concomitant development of flexible capitalism - a new form of capitalist production, characterised by a great capacity of response by enterprises to the quantitative and qualitative variations of demand - has increased the importance of resources and production conditions given by elements that are immobile and not leaning towards geographic mobility, of which certain places are equipped and not others.

In particular, the quality of human resources located in a place becomes of strategic importance which is a function of the attributes of such resources to which value is given in this development phase (Adamo, 1975) and which depends in the final analysis on the conditions of the local environment necessary to produce and reproduce such resources, not losing them to other places and attracting them from other places (Adamo 2003). To create innovative and/or quality products and render companies competitive in general, there is a

¹ Analogously, it would be pointless to say that those who consider, as components or as determinants of territory, economic aspects would demonstrate an economic approach, those who consider political aspects would demonstrate a political approach and those who consider natural or physical aspects would have a physical approach.

specific need today, and even more so in the future, for workers who are not only capable but also creative and co-operative. The geography of innovation and development tends increasingly to coincide, reducing the importance of other competition and location factors, with the geography of knowledge, in particular the technology and know-how which human resources possess and which are therefore collocated resources.

The production and reproduction of these resources, both rare and precious, depends largely on politics and the model of education and professional training, on the heritage of cultural sites and the recreational and cultural activities that take place in the various residential cities and regions.

Cultural events and sites in short are not only a resource or tourist attraction of increasing importance, they constitute an important resource for leisure time spent in the place of residence and is a fundamental factor of residential attraction. This dual importance, for basic (or exportation) activities and for those non-basic (or domestic), explains the increasing weight given to the promotion of events and the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage (including landscape) in current urban development policies.

Support for the cultural heritage and the development of cultural activities create externalities that are positive for corporate investment not only because they stimulate creativity, the diffusion of ideas and the growth of professional skills, but also because they constitute an environment that favours co-operation: that is, the development of a social system in direct contrast with the social relations of production (amongst workers, in addition to that between businessmen and workers) that are imposed by the hierarchical organisation of labour in the Fordist-Taylorist model of capitalism. This new direction is also made possible and requested today by the fact that globalisation shifts market competition from the single company to the local system, enhancing local competitive advantages that derive from the possibility of integration-collaboration with other companies within the local production system and from the values of the local environment that are themselves an indirect form of co-operation, being the expression of socialisation and at the same time of territorialisation to the degree that this is created in a given area.

Increasing cultural activities and support for the cultural heritage favour the growth of various types of co-operation, both direct and indirect, and therefore new capitalist development, not only favouring socialisation between actors in the local network, but also creating or reinforcing their territorial identity and their identification with the problems of their city and region, as well as of the wider territory, national and extra-national, which can constitute in different ways and degrees privileged spaces for relations, and from which there depends in a broader sense local political, economic and cultural life.

Finally, more so than in the past, a heritage and a high-quality cultural life confer a positive identity to the products of local companies, or reinforce the image and therefore world market penetration. This aspect, also important for large companies, becomes essential for small and medium-sized businesses that sell goods of final consumption, such as those that characterise the productive structure of many local Italian and Mediterranean European systems.

With regard to the scale of the territorialisation process, and therefore to the area of territorial systems or geo-systems defined as “local” – that are one of the foundations of the competitiveness of a single company, mediating its relations with the global market – please permit me to add in conclusion several points that will help us get beyond several theoretical formulations which, whilst very interesting, are either vague or hardly interesting. Amongst these I would take into consideration for example a local system as an “intermediate entity between the single company and the global system” as well as the identification of its area as that space lived in by the subjects constituting such an entity or the space in which these identify themselves. Aside from the fact that in doing so we will have as many different spatial environments as there are categories of subjects, and in particular, limiting ourselves to companies, as many roles as they have in the marketplace, there may be (and in fact for many companies there are) a larger number of intermediate entities, and not merely one, the local system between the single company and the global system. For this reason, the “local” system should not be understood merely in a narrower sense (to avoid emptying this of all meaning as we extend the term) as a “territorial” system, but rather, as understood in common language,

as the first fundamental level of territorial aggregation, whose dimensions, in the Italian case, range from the territory of a single township to that of one or more provinces, remaining however a sub-Regional definition. In the specific case of company territorial systems, the area of this first level, the local, corresponds to that spatial zone within which it is possible to take advantage of “agglomeration economies” characteristic of the productive system under consideration which therefore varies according to the dynamics of these economies. More in general, understood as geo-system or social community based on territory, the local system includes an area corresponding to the space in which direct, or physical, relations between subjects exist in the course of a single day.

The question of the territorial scale or dimensions of the “local” system touches upon the issue of geographic levels, as well as the modalities of political decision-making. If we were to assume, as is in fact assumed in all the written works regarding “local development”, that this is a “bottom-up development” that has as its ultimate objective the self-reproduction of the local system itself, then it is “participatory” development - implying strong local identification by the subjects and an assumption on their part of common problems which require forms of negotiation and direct democracy, and which in short require a closeness between the system’s subjects so as to permit frequent personal contacts. In the Italian case, the townships in general have a dimension that of course would allow them this type of participation, but which is in general insufficient as environment of an efficient local productive system. Nevertheless, there are Provinces, which would certainly be able to promote adequate forms of participation to favour local development, and some of these do in fact perform this role, within limits imposed by the new centralising power of the Regions; in addition there is the possibility of “territorial pacts” to assist development between subjects from numerous townships.

The local systems (or network of relations) or even their centres, can be, and by now generally are, thought of as communication points for other networks (or elements of other systems) representable on a smaller scale. Although these networks (or systems of social relations) do not necessarily comprise contiguous spaces (thus not constituting “geographic regions” inserted one inside of the other like matryoshka dolls), and although furthermore the relations between the communication points are not in general hierarchical, and in many cases not even dominant, their representation is of course no less important than traditional geographic regions, and in fact constitute the new frontier of geography at the advent of the era of flexible and global capitalism.

The representation/planning of supra-local networks also highlights (in addition to that of networks and local identities) the need for a geography that is able to reflect the different features of a reality. As the cement that links the structure of the local system it is not only made up of common economic interests, but of a common vision of the world and society, of common beliefs and moral values; the same is also true for the networks of external relations of the local system: these are certainly motivated in the first place, more than the local, by economic interests and their geography is determined primarily by the same economic conditions as the communication points. But undoubtedly, the political and cultural conditions that render possible or favour economic relations are also key factors, as well as physical distance and even the natural environment of the various communication points.

With the intensification of global competition, this growing importance of local networks on one hand, and supra-local networks that are international and generally even global on the other, tends to weaken not only the Nation-State, as has been highlighted by numerous sources; but combined with the fiscal crisis in advanced-capitalist countries deriving from the stagnation of consumption, together with the crisis in the Fordist model, tends to weaken the state itself. It strikes me, in fact, that the re-organisation of the state currently under way with the changes in the economy, intrinsic to the authoritative role of the state as regulatory body of the economic system, has not yet been sufficient to permit the state to fully perform that role; inadequate and in many cases merely superficial has been the redistribution of the regulatory functions of the state between its various territorial levels, whilst even at a supra-national level, this redistribution should respond better to the exigencies of the economic system. The re-organisation of the state currently under way in various nations – and therefore the degree of coherence between the political/institutional and socioeconomic sub-system certainly depends upon the same forms present in the state and the diverse development of the economy

of each nation, incomprehensible without due consideration for the culture, and entire ideological-cultural sub-system that mediates the relationship between politics and the economy. Nevertheless, if culture, and in particular ethnic identities (local, regional) do not become policy and politics, with an original project for change, these are nothing more than obstacles, resistance to change, factors aiding stagnation and not progress, factors contributing to the break-up of the state and society, rather than to pluralistic and multi-cultural development.

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