

# THE CULTURAL APPROACH IN GEOGRAPHY: PRACTICES AND NARRATIVES

Paul CLAVAL

University of Paris-Sorbonne, France

## 1. Introduction

What does the cultural approach offer to geography? In order to answer this question, we have carried out two types of analyses: 1- we examined the 90 communications presented during the Conference of our Commission in Rio de Janeiro on 10-12 June 2003; 2- we compared recent books on cultural geography : those of Mike Crang (1998) for Britain, Giuliana Andreotti (1996-1997) and Adalberto Vallega (2003) for Italy, Boris Grésillon (2002) for France and Don Mitchell (2000) for the United States. The conceptions I have personally developed served as counterpoints in this analysis (Claval, 1995-2002).

## 2. Cultural geographers at work: the Conference of Rio de Janeiro

The Conference of Rio de Janeiro dealt with *The Historical Dimensions of the Relationships Between Space and Culture* (Abreu M., 2003). Some colleagues explored directly the way culture shapes temporalities and spatialities. Most have chosen to start from the research they normally develop in order to show how culture imposes its marks on space and duration: their papers offer in an overview of the objects and practices of contemporary cultural geography.

### 2.1. Culture and the qualitative differentiation of space

Some communications deal with: (i) the relations between human groups and the natural environment they live in; (ii) the significance they give to Cosmos, Earth and Life in this World through the religious beliefs they profess and the ceremonies and rituals they perform; (iii) the procedures of political regulation they mobilize.

The interest of these studies lies in the insights they provide on the qualitative differentiation of human space: for all social groups, there are areas which can be mastered and others which cannot be put under control; there are profane spaces and places where sacredness is present; there is an opposition between areas which allow families or societies to feel at home, and public spaces. In the modern democratic societies, public space is the scene of political debates. More generally, public space is used by individuals and groups to exhibit their merits and attract the attention of the others. It serves as arena where to defy them.

### 2.2. Culture, space and communication

The role of communication in social life was already popular among cultural geographers at the beginning of the twentieth century when the interest in diffusion processes was developed. It is through international migrations that transfers of techniques and knowledge are often achieved, as exemplified by the impact of Black slaves on the Brazilian society. With the contemporary growth of international migrations, great metropolises have become the main theaters of intercultural relations.

Communication shapes the experience of space and time: (i) in the societies where communication is only oral, the opposition between what is close (the area of direct experience) and what is far away and only known through testimonies, is strongly experienced. (ii) in the societies which use the written word, time is constructed historically and space geographically thanks to written records of the past, travel accounts and, increasingly, maps, but without any weakening of the opposition between what is close and what is out of daily reach. (iii) the revolution of modern medias creates a universe of simultaneity and co-presence, with the weakening or disappearing of the hierarchical structures which insured a transition between what was close and what was far away.

### **2.3. Culture and tourism**

The studies on tourism show how the image of "nature" upon which tourism is based on is built. Culture has become an object of consumption and a resource: cultural traditions constitute an important asset for impulsing tourism in a region.

Tourism often helps groups to get conscious of the specificities of their own traditions. The fascination for folk cultures results also from the idea that they mastered forms of sustainable growth.

### **2.4. City and culture**

The cultural approach opens original perspectives on the urban scene. Rural attitudes often survive in some parts of great cities. Ethnic or religious groups shape original neighborhoods: the Jewish one in Rio de Janeiro or the aborigines villages in Australian cities, for instance.

Urban dwellers learned to use the land and real estate markets as speculative devices when the prospects offered by land values overpassed those of industrial shares, or as in nineteenth century São Paulo, those on the slave market.

### **2.5. From "genres de vie" to ethnogeographies**

The study of *genres de vie* is still relevant when it deals with populations that only mastering poor technologies: in order to understand the remarkable extension of the Tupi-Guarani group in the Southern half of Brazil, it is important to know their role in the domestication and diffusion of cassava: they enjoyed a better food supply than the other tribes thanks to this plant.

To the inventory of material techniques used by human groups, today the scholars the analysis of the intellectual and linguistic tools they mobilize in order to strengthen their grasp on the environments they inhabit or exploit. The ethnogeographic perspective appears in this way as a complement to older approaches.

### **2.6. The building of identities**

The feelings of identity change when local traditions undergo important transformations. In Mexico, for instance, there were three decisive periods in this respect: the 16th and 19th centuries, and the last forty years. The attitudes and habits of today bear the mark of the past: the identities which were forged on the American frontier in the 19th century introduced into the American culture a tradition of violence.

National or international events have an impact on local identities. Pan-American identities fluctuated much in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries depending on the U.S. attitudes towards Latin America. The impact of globalization transforms the representations local groups have of their possibilities of development.

For sharing identities, groups have to get aware of their common problems. The lower mobility of women made more difficult the building of female identities in still traditional groups, but it did not prevent it, as is shown in the *sertão* of Sergipe, Brazil.

### **2.7. Rootedness, memory and territoriality**

Identities confer to individuals and groups the consistency they do not possess naturally and give them a measure of permanency. The link which is developed by a group with the place it inhabits and perceives as its own is often the main asset of its symbolic stability: hence the significance of rootedness, memory and territoriality in cultural geography.

When a migration severs the links woven along the time with the place people that lived in, the need to restore symbolically this relation is intense, as is shown by Argentinian examples.

The inheritance which gives a sense to the life of individuals and groups may be materialized in a virgin land, expressed through feasts or imprinted in vernacular or monumental urban landscapes.

## **2.8. The construction of places by names images, and narratives**

Many of documents presented during the Rio de Janeiro Conference dealt with words and representations. In the travel or geographic narratives, space appears mainly as a tapestry of names. For example in Dalmatia, the use of foreign names to designate touristic places confers them a new aura.

The building of places by narratives goes back a very long time in the history of literature. It became more significant with the colonization. Cartoons and youth novels reveal new ways of perceiving old places or landscapes. Movies play an important role in the genesis of contemporary perceptions. The comparison between the plans for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center destroyed on the 11 September 2001 offers a fascinating view over the symbolic dimension of this sector of Lower Manhattan.

## **3. An overview upon the practices of the cultural approach in geography**

The Rio de Janeiro Conference offered a good idea of the research currently developed in the cultural field. Old themes are still alive: a part of contemporary research always deals with the cultural differentiation of space by material techniques.

However, themes and methods are however changing rapidly. For many colleagues the cultural approach is a necessary component of their research strategies, even if their central interest lies elsewhere: social, urban, political or economic problems are influenced or shaped by the cultural context in which they are observed.

An anthropology of space is emerging: it stresses the opposition between what is private and what is public, what is profane and what is sacred, between the domestic aspects of life and those which allow individuals or groups to express themselves and participate in the competition for public acknowledgement and status.

Space, thus as analysed by cultural studies, is full of history. The living memory of the societies which rely exclusively on orality differs from the historical memory of the societies based on the written word. In the global societies born from the revolutions of rapid transport and telecommunications, local environments have lost a part of the meaning they had in the past. Populations are more sensitive to the universal co-presence of cultures created by the new conditions of transport and communication than to the messages of tradition conveyed through landscapes.

## **4. The narratives on the cultural approach in some recent textbooks**

### **4.1. What is the nature and extent of the cultural field?**

Recent books on cultural geography start from a reflection on the nature and extent of culture.

1. As understood by the social sciences and the learned public, the term culture was initially introduced by the German anthropologists and ethnologists in the late eighteenth century. It was adopted by Tylor in 1871 and increasingly used in the English-speaking World from the end of the nineteenth century. In France, where people preferred to speak of civilization, it became usual at the end of World War Two.

In this broad sense, culture is made of all that is not inborn in human beings. It combines material elements – the artefacts – and cognitive ones – that some people call mentifacts.

For those who accept this conception of culture, inspiration comes primarily from anthropology, ethnology and the history of techniques.

2. For other people, culture has a more restricted meaning : it is rather made of mentifacts than artefacts. Talk about culture is to stress the intellectual faculties of individuals and the systems of signs which they use to communicate. The significance given to talking, narratives and images becomes essential.

Inspiration comes from the sciences of languages (linguistics, semiotics, etc.) and humanities.

3. The third way to conceive culture is still more restrictive: it focuses on the artefacts and mentifacts related to artistic activity. In modern societies, cultural institutions are mainly concerned with this form of culture : they are made of museums, libraries, theaters, opera houses, historical preservation services, etc.

Creativity is the fundamental characteristic of culture for those who adopt this conception. They are looking towards art history and literature for inspiration.

#### **4.2. Boris Grésillon and culture as artistic and intellectual expression**

In his essay on Berlin as a capital city of culture, Boris Grésillon focuses on its artistic creativity (Grésillon, 2002). There were different phases in its cultural evolution : a long period of preparation, from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, when the Prussian monarchy accumulated cultural institutions - museums, theaters, opera-houses, etc.; two periods during Berlin appeared as a cultural centre at the World scale: the Weimar Republic, and the ten years following the fall of the Wall. In between, the nazi and communist regimes cast a gloom over the creativity of the city.

Boris Grésillon's study is a fascinating example of what can be written on the rise, decline and resurrection of major cultural centres. However it covers however only a part of the cultural field.

#### **4.3. The spiritualist inspiration of Giuliana Andreotti**

Recently italian geographers have recently developed a strong interest for cultural studies. This curiosity was certainly prepared by the ancientness and wealth of the Italian reflection concerning *beni culturali*, monumental and artistic inheritance as well as landscapes laden with history.

Giuliana Andreotti insists on landscape analysis and takes as a model the two papers of Lehman on the Lake of Garda and Tuscany.( Andreotti, 1996; Lehman, 1949; Lehman, 1970) Giuliana Andreotti accepts his positions:

"Landscape, as it presents itself phenomenologically, is seen as an individual totality endowed with forms, with an image internally structured and thus, as indicated by the fundamental definition given by Lehmann, founded on the 'Physionomy of landscape'" (Muller, 1986, p. 1).

The aim of his approach is to bring to the fore "the *reason for being* of landscape, the *reason for being* of its culture, which identifies itself with the springing up of its humanism" (Andreotti, 1990, p. 22) thanks to an "intimate research upon the links between an environment and its history"(*ibid.*).

Just as Grésillon Andreotti considers culture as the highest part of human activity, but she focused more on the harmony of landscapes than on creative activity.

#### **4.4. The role of narratives in the geography of Mike Crang**

Boris Grésillon and Giuliana Andreotti have a restricted conception of the cultural field. Mike Crang develops broader perspectives. He insists on landscapes and their symbolic meanings. He delves on the role of narratives in the shaping of the realities people perceive. He takes advantage of Denis Cosgrove's study on the iconography of landscapes. He shares Peter Jackson's interest in the construction of geographic objects through narratives. It is in the chapters on the cultural construction of consumption or the cultures of production that the originality of Mike Crang's approach is the most apparent : Mike Crang's cultural geography is not only a specialized part of our discipline. It leads to a whole reorganization of a field like economic geography. It initiates a critical approach to the epistemology of geography.

#### **4.5. The role of narratives in Adalberto Vallega : signs, symbols and metaphors**

In his book Adalberto Vallega adopts a largely semiotic inspiration (Vallega A., 2003). He tries to decipher the messages that signs and symbols inscribe in space. For him, culture is made of a universe of symbols:

*"The production of symbols [becomes] an intellectual activity which, considered in reference to social context, shapes culture. On the basis of this model, cultural anthropologists retain that human species existed before culture and evolved through its capacity to use symbolic production and better it. Made of language, beliefs, codes of behaviour, etc., culture became in this way a reality in itself, which defines and feeds itself, and thus exists independently from the society itself since it is made of an heritage of symbols and meanings which is handed down from generation to generation; it accumulates, diffuses,*

*and changes not only in relation with the impulsions coming from the human community itself, but also because of its own power, its intrinsic vitality" (Ibidem).*

On this basis, Vallega interprets places as an intersection of nature, society and transcendency. He proposes a subtle reading of landscapes, which he conceives as emotional windows expressing the *genius loci*. He opposes the geographical analysis of landscapes, where the priority is given to the material logic of places, and their cultural analysis, which "is the representation of the way the subject projects himself into reality, of his *being-in-the-World*, in the heideggerian meaning of the term: [it is] a representation which is made of signs with strong intellectual and spiritual connotations, which unite memory and project, past and future, existence, nature, society, transcendency".(Ibid...).

#### **4.6. The "revolutionary" conceptions of Don Mitchell**

Nobody is able to remain indifferent to the book Don Mitchell has published in 2000. It bears everywhere the mark of a passionate personality which dreams to give a revolutionary content to the cultural approach. Because of the generosity of his commitment, he may be forgiven for shortcomings which would otherwise rule him out: his neglect of the cultures which do not rely on the English language for instance.

Don Mitchell is a marxist. This fact has two consequences: (i) Materiality is important: even if culture is made of symbols, signs, naratives, representations etc., an overemphasis on them is dangerous since words and images refer to real material and social realities which have never to be forgotten. (ii) Don Mitchell is very critical of those who center cultural geography on the individual, his sensibility, his preferences: culture is a social reality.

Don Mitchell refuses to give a precise definition of culture, but his examples show that his conception is very broad: it includes all that human beings have aquired. What is more important for him is the idea that the cultural approach has to focus on culture wars:

"My examples are largely drawn [...] from that realm of social experience that has to be called 'culture wars'. Culture wars are those battles over the meaning and structure of social relationships [...], the institutions [...], and the spaces [...] that govern our lives" (Mitchell D., 2000, p. XVI).

It is because culture wars are fought through the use of words and images than representations are so important for the cultural approach. The battles Don Mitchell analyses occur most of the time on public spaces where people try to express their convictions in order to be acknowledged by the others.

Don Mitchell asserts revolutionary principles but does not always appear as a radical. In his approach, they appear just as an element of marxist rhetoric: the social scene is an arena where Good and Evil struggle permanently; progress can only result from the blood shed by those who fight for the right cause.

#### **4.7. A comparison**

It is interesting to compare field work and the principles developed by the theoreticians of the cultural approach. The role of signs, symbols and narratives is underlined by all : it is one of the most original orientations of contemporary geography.

In spite of the diversity of cultures, broad conceptual categories can be efficiently used to analyse them: domestic space vs. collective one, private vs. public, profane vs sacred, areas of expression vs featureless space. The cultural approach introduces in this way an anthropology of space.

### **5. The cultural turn in geography**

Allowing for cultural realities enriches geography : the process transforms the whole discipline. The cultural approach ruins the conceptions of space which prevailed for long among geographers and introduces new ones.

#### **5.1. The prevailing conceptions of space in human geographies until the 1970s**

1. Jean Brunhes gave in *La Géographie humaine* a clear presentation of the "positive" conception of geography (Brunhes 1910): the discipline had only to describe space as resulting from natural processes and human action. It proposed no explanation. It

analysed landscapes and built typologies. It went deeper only when it related the evolution of the patterns it discovered.

2. For the ecological perspective, which developed also at the end of the 19th century, the aim was different. The terrestrial space was made of two components, (i) the environment and (ii) the living beings which inhabited it and drew their food from it. The distinction of these two sets of elements gave geography an explanatory function, but in a determinist stance.
3. The analysis of *genres de vie* was based on the ecological view of space, but showed that man/milieu relationships evolved as a result of the human capacity to invent new technologies and escape local limitations through trade with other regions. This possibilist conception, with its emphasis on technology and circulation, remained dominant until the 1950s.
4. The economic approaches which came out in the 1950s and 1960s focused on the analysis of two forms of flows at work on the earth: (i) the flows of energy and matter studied by ecology and (ii) the economic flows between producers and consumers. Space was analysed as the location of economic resources and as an obstacle to the transport of goods and the transfer of information. The New Geography explained in this way the organization of space.

The naturalistic approaches of the beginning of the twentieth century devoted much attention to landscapes, but were unable to explain the patterns they observed. The New Geography had a real explanatory power, but conceived space in an abstract way. It talked about resources, amenities, transparency, but not about the real things and people. The cultural approach is more balanced.

## **5.2. Culture and the enrichment of the theories of spatial organization**

1. How to give back to geography its grasp on concrete reality without depriving it of its explanatory power? By changing the hypotheses relative to decision making in the theories it uses. In the models that geography borrowed from economics, human beings were perfectly rational and enjoyed a free and total access to information on the economic scene. Is it not better to consider that human beings have only a limited vision of space? Everyone has in his mind a sketch, a mental map, of the areas and things he knows. In an urban area, mental maps have generally a sectorial dimension since they result from the daily trips from the suburbs where people live to the centre where they work. Since these maps are elaborated within communities, the values individuals give to different locations reflect the collective preferences of their group, and the places which are central for them.

What does happen when a large share or the totality of a group starts valuing a place for non-economic reasons? The shape of the whole city changes, as shown by Jean-François Staszak in his studies on self fulfilling prophecies in geography (Staszak J.F., 1999a; 1999b; 2000).

2. All the parts of mental maps have not the same nature: for Jean Laponce, they are centred on points which differ from the others since the value attached to them is symbolic (Laponce J., 1984). This structure explains the dynamics of urban spaces when they are inhabited by two (or more) groups. In Montreal, the coexistence of English-speaking and French-speaking populations was a peaceful one during the second half of the nineteenth century: at that time, the English-speaking group was proud of the Central Business District which proved its capacity to organize a big Empire, whereas French-Canadians identified with the church of their neighborhood or the rural parish they came from. The relation of the two groups changed at the beginning of the twentieth century when their anchoring points, still distinct, became located in the central part of the city. Conflicts appeared when the French-Canadian society ceased to be fundamentally a Roman Catholic one: its mental maps were for the first time centred on political and economic symbols: in order to live in a French-Canadian city, its centre had to use the French language and express French values.

### 5.3. The genesis of symbolism and the qualitative differentiation of space

Each system of communication allows the development of relations within a specific range. Beyond this circle, there are spheres which are closed to human beings : (i) the immemorial in the purely oral societies; (ii) what is heavenly, rational or utopic in the societies of the written word; (iii) research centres working without any social and economic constraints in contemporary societies. Some persons enjoy, however, the privilege to get information on these other Worlds : they are intellectual explorers or religious prophets. The perspectives they discover give a meaning to individual or collective life and show what should be and what should not be. The "realities" discovered in this way are more "real" than those of this World since they pertain to a World of essences.

The qualitative differentiation of space results from the widely shared belief in communication with other Worlds. As a result, some areas have only the trivial attributes of the profane World while others are laden with the sacredness which results from their proximity to the other World.

### 5.4. Space and individual and social expression

As soon as geographers accept to integrate, in their analyses, the symbolic dimensions of things, beings and environments, their task changes for two reasons:

1. The objective properties of objects, places and people cease to be the only significant elements for individuals or groups: it is their symbolic dimension which is essential. Space is no more as a neutral stand or a monotonous transport plain. Interfaces, where messages, signs and symbols may be inscribed, become in many ways more significant than the real things or places.

Human beings exist only in so far as they pertain to a symbolic whole: they need identities. This quest is often expressed through feelings of territoriality: people identify themselves to a monument, a landscape or a place where some have shed their blood for the sake of all.

2. The realities human geographers study are built by human beings. They always incorporate a symbolic dimension. It is the reason for which the whole discipline has to be reconstructed: there is no reality which can be characterized as economic, political, social, urban, rural, etc, for ever. We always see the World through categories which are cultural constructions.

The cultural approach leads geographers to develop a critical attitude concerning the conceptions they use : concepts have to be systematically deconstructed.

## 6. Conclusion

It is a good idea for a geographer to consider culture as the totality of what has been learned. It includes all that people have to memorize and internalize in order to find their ways, exploit the environments in which they live, communicate and build social organizations. This set is essentially made of *mentifacts*, which cannot, however, be dissociated from the *artefacts* they allow to conceive and use. Using another image, the cultural approach is interested in the *software* human beings have built, but this software has a grasp on material reality, on *hardware*. The first character of the cultural approach is thus to remind that it is impossible to dissociate the analysis of material facts and the study of representations.

Modern geography has to focus on processes. It first studies the handing down of know-hows, knowledge and beliefs, analyses the way information is broadcast and stresses the role of symbols in strengthening the bonds of groups uncertain about their identity. Resulting from communication, culture necessarily varies with place and time.

Stressing communication leads obviously to focus on representations, narratives and images, but without neglecting the material realities they are picturing and the fact that cultural space is fundamentally structured by roads, lines and networks.

The cultural approach has a fundamental temporal dimension: it shows how people receive an inheritance from the past, enrich it through their present experience and try to give a sense to their lives through their projection into the future. The building of self and the development of personality are important topics in this perspective. The individual has always to be seized in his relations to his group : the world the child grasps is already shaped by the words,

concepts and perspectives he receives from his parents and neighbours: perception is conditioned by the society where he lives. As a consequence, the cultural approach never is an individualist one: social reality is permanently present in the lives of human beings, because they receive their linguistic and intellectual tools from their group.

The processes that the cultural approach explores concern at the same time the construction of self and the institutionalization of society. Space is never a neutral stand, since it allows for a division of life into a succession of periods of isolation and social intercourse. Space is institutionalized as public or private, profane or sacred, or as a place of ostentation where individuals and groups assert their statuses.

The analysis of cultural processes involves the normative dimension of human life: individuals make plans for the future; they strive for ideals; they search to promote their faith, convictions and interests.

The development of the cultural perspective does not lead only to the renewal of a particular chapter of geography - cultural geography. It also opens the way to a revision of the epistemological foundations of the whole discipline and to a restructuring of its content. The boundaries between economic geography, political geography, social geography, etc, are not the same everywhere. They change with time. They are relative to particular cultures. In economic geography, demand always expresses particular sets of values, and enterprises develop specific styles of relations because they generate their own cultures. Political geography renounces to the postulates concerning sovereignty it used a generation ago: they were useful for the forms of politics born in Western Europe in the seventeenth century; today they are losing their relevance.

At the same time, geographic knowledge ceases to appear as a privilege reserved only to the societies which have participated to Western adventure since Antiquity. All the human groups produce systems of geographic knowledge, which are worth to be studied: they are today explored by ethnogeography.

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