

CULTURAL (RE) TURNING IN GEOGRAPHY: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT ¹

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1. Introduction

“Diversity is at the heart of geography - from the varieties in continents and climates to the interrelationships between natural resources and how people live...All of us yearn for a world in which our views, our cultures, our beliefs, our fundamental rights, are respected no matter who we are, how we look, or where we come from”. This is how Mary Robinson, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, addressed delegates at the 29th International Geographical Congress in Seoul, 14-18, 2000, upon receipt of the *Earth and Humanity Medal 2000* by the International Geographical Union. A few weeks later, scholars from all over the world assembled in Rome to explore the potential role of universities in the quest for a “new humanism”. “Renaissance humanism”, one speaker recalled, “set up a new idea of truth as a dynamic statement, not previously defined or constructed, but something to be discovered and then applied... the joint venture of new scientific discovery with the humanistic approach to mankind's problems enabled the university to nourish innovation and offer a rigorous critique of institutions and social relations”(Bricall, 2000). It was such “airing” of university life, in his view, that was sadly lacking today. Does the “cultural turn”, evident in geography and in a variety of other fields, herald such fresh air? It has certainly sharpened understandings of human behaviour in space, time and place; it has unmasked the myriad ways in which values and meanings are socially constructed; it has undermined previous hegemonies of orthodoxy and method and evoked a more general awareness of reflexivity in disciplinary thought and practice. In many ways the cultural turn has uncovered forgotten aspects of geography, signalling a re-turn to some of the unresolved challenges of the past. Given the challenges facing the discipline at the opening of this Third Millennium, it might be useful to reflect generally on developments during the previous century, and to identify ways in which the cultural re/turn might equip us to confront these challenges.

2. Twentieth century geography: retrospect and prospect

Geography lies at the heart of scholarly traditions in many world civilisations, inviting enquiry into the nature of the universe and the dynamics of planet Earth, prompting exploration and adventure, the naming and claiming of territory, and theories about relationships between human societies and their environments. As an academic discipline and formal course in universities and schools, geography has acquired other histories, few uncontested. During its disciplinary period, geography has continued to mirror the fluctuating fortunes of nations and empires, fitting itself within nationally-defined structures of pedagogy and research, while also remaining attuned to changing trends of scientific thought and practice internationally. Tensions between scholarly integrity and the structural imperatives of disciplinary identity have at times led to an ignoring of the lived geographies of everyday life, and the contradictions which sometimes underlie taken-for-granted ways of life and designed environments.

At the dawn of a new century there is enhanced awareness of geographical diversity in humanity's lived experience. Mountain and plain, river and lake, woodland and wildlife may be “explainable” in the categories of natural and social science, but in everyday life each cultural group understands nature, space, and time through its own special filters. To inhabit planet earth every creature has to develop a sense of place, space, time, and movement, i.e., geographical knowledges. To negotiate diverse geographies has surely been an enduring challenge of terrestrial existence, from the politics of empire to the arrangement of one's

¹ The substance of this presentation overlaps substantially with a previously published article entitled “Human Geography as Social Science: Retrospect ad Prospect” *Erdkunde* 57:4 (2003), 263-271. Figures and text are reproduced here with permission of the editors.

kitchen, office, or front garden. It has also afforded rationale for an academic discipline called Geography in various Nation-States, and for varieties of “applied geography” down the centuries.

While the record of academic geography varies greatly in detail and circumstance throughout the world, the prospect today involves fresh challenges and opportunities. On the positive side one can note evidence, in a wide range of fields - literature, history, biology and engineering - of a “geographical sense”, an acknowledgement that all human endeavour must be regarded in terms of its implications for Planet Earth. Thus today, as humanity grapples with challenges regarding global sustainability, the time seems right for geographers to press forward, welcoming opportunities for collaboration with colleagues in a wide variety of fields. A fundamental dilemma, however, remains. While environmental issues transcend territorial and political boundaries, taken-for-granted practices of science remain firmly ensconced within national institutions. Facing this Third Millennium, geographers all over the world need to collaborate more effectively in confronting these challenges.

3. Geographical Exploration: from Observation to Representation

The twentieth century bequeathed many profound transformations in the practice of geography. Accounts on these trends, reflective no doubt of the narrator's preoccupations, reveal quite as much about the social contexts of such changes as they do about the epistemological claims of a scholarly field called Geography (Stoddart, 1981; Johnston, 1985; Buttimer, 1993). At century's end, post-modernist moods favoured multiple interpretations and there was widespread skepticism about generalisations (Haraway, 1976; Olsson, 1979, Soja, 1989). Often it seemed that substantive content took second place to critique on ways of seeing, ways of practice. Contextual approaches facilitated more nuanced interpretations of intellectual history. For some indeed science as a whole could be regarded as historically-situated knowledges (Livingstone, 1994). Synergies operative within science and society at particular moments are surely important. It is also instructive to seek insight into general changes over time. At the risk of over generalisation, let me suggest a four-phase narrative on changing stances, from observation to participation, to interpretation, to representation².

In the early periods of discipline-formation, geographers prided themselves on their skills in observation and cartographic representation of reality (Fig.1). Such impressions were still expressed at mid-century (James and Jones, 1954; Johnston, 1983; Claval, 1984). From its beginnings as academic discipline, geography proved to be a valuable training ground for the exploration, understanding, and conquest of space and resources; for the imposition of order deemed rational by managerial authorities; for information on areas, distances, flora and fauna, peoples and cultures, in language categories and narrative frames understandable “back home” (Harvey 1984, Buttimer, 1974, 1993).

Geographical knowledge was regarded as objective, anchored on epistemological foundations (Hartshorne, 1959; US National Academy of Sciences, 1965). Throughout history, of course, there have been varieties of practice, pioneering and mavericks, scholars who followed routine paradigmatic lines, and those who deliberately sought alternatives. Some were more aware than others of differences among cultures and ways of life. Debates over “environmental determinism”, “genetic explanation”, relationships between physical and human geography abounded particularly during the early twentieth century.

After the mid-century European “World War” and the de-colonisation of former empires, a new wave of spatial science swept through university curricula. Human geographers claimed status as social scientists, with particular competence on spatial aspects of phenomena, events, patterns and processes (Ullman, 1954; Haggett, 1965; Berry, 1964). With growing self-confidence, too, there came a heightened awareness of differences in perceptions of reality and the geographical sources of interest conflicts: elite vs popular, managerial vs consumer, invader vs native, in access to space and resources (Lowenthal, 1961; Blaut, 1970; Hagerstrand, 1970; Buttimer, 1972). More and more geographers recognised themselves as

² This tabular summary does not imply, of course, that changes over time in these various knowledge interests followed a strictly chronological sequence; they unfolded at different moments and varied considerably from one country to another. This paper builds upon a previously published essay on changing “states-of-the-art” in the practice of geography. Buttimer A., 1998.

“participants” quite as much as “observers” (Fig. n. 2). Much energy was invested in developing “qualitative” research methods including those of “participant-observation” (Ley and Samuels, 1978; Buttimer and Seamon, 1980; Rose, 1993).

Fig. n. 1. GEOGRAPHY as OBSERVATION from its institutionalisation as "discipline" to mid-20th century

PRACTICES	Exploration
	Inventory
	Mapping
INTERESTS	National/Imperial
	Commercial
	Military
KNOWLEDGE	Foundational
	Objective
	Theory and Laws
EVALUATION	Epistemology

Knowledge was now seen as "subjective", reflecting the social worlds within which it had been produced (Foucault, 1966; Berger and Luckman, 1967; Berque, 1982; Saarinen and Sell, 1984). Truth claims were no longer to be presented in exclusively epistemological terms, i.e., in terms of their respective logics of enquiry, analysis and proof.

The fertile idea of “paradigm” took wing on the premise that social context exercised a determining influence on processes of knowledge production (Kuhn, 1970; Schütz, 1973; Lefebvre, 1974). During the late 1960s a substantial literature revealed manifold ways whereby the nexus of power and knowledge legitimised certain practices and suppressed others (Bernal, 1965; Santos, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977).

One enduring impact of Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was the shift of focus from epistemological to social evaluations of knowledge itself. And a corollary was that truth claims should be negotiated dialectically. In courses and seminars on history and philosophy of geography, insights from sociology seemed quite as important as those from analytical philosophy (Ferrier, Racine and Raffestin, 1978; Capel, 1981; Granö, 1981).

Fig. n. 2. From OBSERVATION to PARTICIPATION.

	1960's	1970's
	OBSERVATION	PARTICIPATION
PRACTICES	Exploration	Insider/outsider
	Inventory	Advocacy
	Mapping	Modelling
INTERESTS	National/Imperial	Social justice
	Commercial	Equality
	Military	Reformation
KNOWLEDGE	Foundational	Dialectical
	Objective	Subjective
	Theory and Laws	Paradigms
EVALUATION	Epistemology	Sociology

By the seventies an awareness grew that observers, in fact, were participants in the research process. A new agenda now dawned: how to negotiate various interpretations of

events, patterns and processes (Habermas, 1968; Gadamer, 1965; Ricoeur, 1971). Structuralist strains of the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, by laying emphasis on processes of knowledge production, at times resonated with strains from the humanities proclaiming “death to the author” (Derrida, 1972; Rorty, 1979).

The combined result was a shaky consensus that focus should rest on *texts* themselves as social products emerging from particular *contexts* (Fig. n. 3). Beginning with the French *nouveaux philosophes*, translated and re-interpreted later in Anglo-American literary circles, there were claims that one had already reached a “post-foundational” era with respect to knowledge (Feyerabend, 1961; Glucksman, 1977). Texts would now be examined in terms of contexts, attention focussed on socially-constructed discourses; often indeed one found evidence of imperialist, sexist, racist, or other biases (Smith, 1979; Gale and Olsson; 1979; Stoddart; 1981).

A central challenge at this juncture was that of finding languages which could permit dialogue on diverse interpretations of reality. Hermeneutics now competed with both epistemology and sociology in core courses for graduate students. Metaphor replaced paradigm in the titles of student essays and journal articles - pointing already in the direction of symbolic representation, a theme which would fuel enthusiasm for a “New Cultural Geography” (Cosgrove, 1984; Dematteis, 1985; Claval, 1999).

The challenge of negotiating culturally-diverse ways of experiencing nature and landscape returned as a central research question for geographers (Seamon and Mugerauer, 1985; Olwig, 2002; Buttimer, Brunn and Wardenga, 1999a; Buttimer and Wallin, eds., 1999b).

During the 1990s indeed much attention was drawn to issues of representation, mediated discourses, to aesthetic and ethical elements of geographical texts (Jameson F., 1983; Cheney M., 1989; Soja E., 1989). At century's end geographers were more self-confident in their critical reflections on taken-for-granted practices within the discipline.

Fig. n. 3. OBSERVATION, PARTICIPATION, INTERPRETATION

	1960's	1970s	1980s
	OBSERVATION	PARTICIPATION	INTERPRETATION
PRACTICES	Exploration	Insider/outsider	Texts/contexts
	Inventory	Advocacy	Deconstruction
	Mapping	Modelling	Language
KNOWLEDGE	Foundational	Dialectical	Post-foundational
	Objective	Equality	Metaphor
	Theory and Laws	Paradigms	Hermeneutics
EVALUATION	Epistemology	Sociology	Hermeneutics

Figure 4. OBSERVATION, PARTICIPATION, INTERPRETATION, REPRESENTATION

	1960's	1970s	1980s	1990s
	OBSERVATION	PARTICIPATION	INTERPRETATION	REPRESENTATION
PRACTICES	Exploration	Insider/outsider	Texts/contexts	Texts/contexts
	Inventory	Advocacy	Deconstruction	Media/symbols
	Mapping	Modelling	Language	Remembering
INTERESTS	National/	Social justice	Social constr.	Identity Imperial
	Commercial	Reformation	Power & knowledge	Diversity
	Military	Equality	<i>Habitus</i>	Environment
KNOWLEDGE	Foundational	Dialectical	Post-foundational	Relational
	Objective	Equality	Metaphor	Mediated
	Theory and Laws	Paradigms	Hermeneutics	Situated discourse
EVALUATION	Epistemology	Sociology	Hermeneutics	Aesthetics/ethics

Concerns extended beyond matters of cognitive style or intellectual credibility, even beyond issues of social construction and societal relevance to issues of representation, of the aesthetics of display, signs and symbols, iconography and identity (Linde-Laursen and Nilsson, 1995; Yaeger, 1996; Castells, 1997; Hoelscher, Adams and Till, 2001).

The post-modern turn found scholars more willing to acknowledge diversity in geographical knowledges, eager also to probe their origins, modes of articulation, production and reception as well as their implications for the construction of images - of self and other, of "home place" and "other's space", of "nature", "gender" and "culture". (Cooke, 1989; Rose, 1993; Paasi, 1996; Tuan, 1999).

Representation virtually replaced observation as task definition for the late twentieth century geography texts (Fig. n. 4).

At century's end, however, as some minds pondered issues of *representation*, a new wave of enhanced possibilities of *observation* via satellite and electronic data-processing beckoned (International Council for Science, 2002; Himiyama, 2002). Many wondered whether this enhanced technical competence and vastly increased volumes of information would lead to better understanding of global issues.

Meanwhile student numbers increased everywhere, no doubt encouraged to approach environmental issues from solid training in geography. As a new century - even a new millenium in Western calendars - dawns, there is surely cause for reflection on challenges facing Geography as discipline.

4. Paradox and prospect

The dawn of this Third Millenium reveals many a paradox. The scholarly world faces dilemmas some of which have particular poignancy for geographers. Functional specialisation among knowledge fields has brought great advantages and keener insights into particular phenomena and processes, but it has led to fragmentation of expertise and difficulties in the integration of results. At the same time, however, there have been unprecedented advances in technologies of communication. Questions arise as to whether these trends could be mutually balancing or mutually re-inforcing?

Paradoxical, too, it seems, that while global humanity looks to science for elucidations or solutions to global environmental problems, many academic researchers - including geographers - seem preoccupied with internal (disciplinary) questions. Scholars identify as topical specialists within sub-disciplinary rubrics rather than with the profession as a whole. Career advancement depends on external research funding and networking within specialised fields. Questions arise about the wider practical implications of functional specialisation: has it enhanced our capacity to comprehend environmental problems? Or has it, in fact, impeded it?

"The signs of severe environmental distress are all around us", Kofi Annan reminded American geographers in a plenary address to the AAG in March 2001, "Unsustainable practices are woven deeply into the fabric of modern life. Land degradation threatens food security. Forest destruction threatens biodiversity. Water pollution threatens public health, and fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future. Environmental concerns are the national security issues of the future" (Annan, 2002)

The closing decades of the twentieth century have indeed witnessed a dramatic increase in global environmental research programmes. There is now incontrovertible scientific evidence that human activities are destabilizing global climate. Food and disease crises in some of the world's wealthiest nations now begin to question the "scientific" bases on which the development plans of previous decades were based. Leading scientists increasingly claim that economy and ecology need not be regarded as mutually opposed "This understanding that development needs to be sustainable was the conceptual breakthrough of the Earth Summit of 1992", Kofi Annan noted, yet, "In the years since then, however, we have too often gone on with business as usual" (Ibid.).

For geographers world-wide there are surely major dilemmas here. Despite the impressive investment in conventional research programmes, publications, and declarations, the number, range and severity of environmental problems continues to grow. Questions arise as to whether taken-for-granted scientific practices are adequate for the elucidation and/or solution of environmental issues, or indeed whether our taken-for-granted practices and their

applications may be part of the problem? The essential questions transcend epistemology, as historians of geographical thought have long since recognised. The most difficult challenges emerge in the transposition of scientific results and statements about “what is” into policy terms of “what ought to be”. Often indeed there has been a failure to acknowledge essential differences between descriptive and normative discourse. A major disillusioning fact at the dawn of this millenium is surely the failure of individuals, institutions, and governments in the rich industrial and post-industrial parts of the world to change behaviour, to question their taken-for-granted ways of life and ways of thinking.

Critical engagement with questions on values in the taken-for-granted folkways of academia therefore remains a perennial task. Consequences of taken-for-granted social constructions of scientific expertise have very tangible salience for geographers. While most places, events and spatial phenomena in the world today are subject to influences which transcend territorial boundaries, practices of geography are still tightly ensconced within national institutions. At a time when trans-national and trans-disciplinary collaboration is urgently needed, scholarly research remains subject to constraints which impede or at least discourage that. Disciplines are line-items in university budgets; they compete for funding within national ministries and research councils; degrees and diplomas are earned through discipline-specific curricula. Given its traditions of comparative and multi-scalar study, could geographers not assume leadership roles in facilitating international collaboration and in offering sound scientific bases on which trans-disciplinary knowledges and understanding could be achieved? Each geographer or national group may identify different priorities among the challenges which face us. But it is difficult to envisage successful outcomes without more critically realist reflections on past experiences and improved international and trans-disciplinary collaboration. And in virtually all settings where geography is practiced today, there are paradoxes and puzzles in the legacies of former generations which might become prime catalysts for creativity in shaping a discipline equipped for a Third Millenium.

5. Geography for a Third Millenium

Two epitome texts from the millenium year illustrate something of our intellectual challenges emerging from the twentieth century. Skeptical of modernity and traditional Cartesian certainties, post-modernist writers celebrated uncertainties of geographical knowledge and conventional cartography (Cosgrove and Martins, 2000, p. 99).

The mapped globe that emerged over the course of a half-millennium between 1450 and 1950 inscribed with its linear fixities of latitude and longitude, of continental coastlines and of political territories, has been displaced by the blurred surfaces and relativities of satellite images of earth, the interconnections of virtual global hyperspace, and the permeable territorialities of a decentered, post-colonial sphere. In such a fluid and uncanny space-time, attempts to "map" the millennial moment in specific locations acquire considerable poignancy.

While some cultural geographers explored ideas of creative representation, performative mapping and the aesthetics of display, others bemoaned the loss of cognitive clarity and the disconcerting confusion of contemporary global trends: (Hamilton, 2000, p. 3).

The relationship between global economic and ecological systems is an exceedingly complex one that abounds with paradoxes. On one hand we accept a paradigm of exponentially increasing human output, on the other we are increasingly aware of the vulnerability of the fundamental life support systems that provide both the raw materials and the waste assimilation capacity on which we depend. Intellectual confusion abounds! The complexity of these relationships is visible at many levels and in many different fields, none of which can be fully understood in isolation.

Each of these texts resonate to the late twentieth century legacy of “post-ings”: post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism; its wearisome “anti-s”: anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, even anti-scientist. At century's close we seemed to be far more sure of what we were against - what we wished freedom *from* - than what we wished freedom *for*. Yet one of the resounding results of recent reflections is the recognition that there are varieties of geographical knowledges - academic, popular, applied and others - each constructed and disseminated in particular contexts and serving particular human interests - rather than one form of knowledge called Geography.

In this vein, might one not now dare to re-define some of the major challenges facing humanity and environment today in terms of competing, contested or conflicting geographical knowledges? Could this insight not offer fresh approaches to global environmental issues? Within each of these knowledges one can easily detect elements of both descriptive and normative, i.e., commonly accepted “truths” about “what is”, and commonly accepted norms for “what ought to be”. One central opportunity for geographers today is to open up dialogue on the relative strengths and limitations of these diverse knowledges, assessing them also in terms of their appropriateness for sustainable lifeways in the future. For within geography itself one finds varieties of knowledges spanning the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences. Should we not then be in an ideal position to host trans-disciplinary dialogue within the international scientific community?

UNESCO's millenium *Declaration on science and the use of scientific knowledge*, in fact, acknowledged the value of diverse geographical knowledges (Buttimer, 2001):

Modern science does not constitute the only form of knowledge and closer links need to be established between this and other forms, systems and approaches to knowledge, for their mutual enrichment and benefit...Such knowledge systems represent an enormous wealth. Not only do they harbour information as yet unknown to modern science, but they are also expressions of other ways of living in the world, other relationships between society and nature, and other approaches to the acquisition and construction of knowledge.

The ideal geographer of the next millenium will be one who seeks to understand the nature and dynamics of general global systems and still remain solidly anchored in particular local/regional contexts. With the ability to comprehend broader patterns comparatively, and thus recognising where and how influences from one realm could impinge positively or negatively on others, geographers could become catalyst for dialogue among contested and competing local interests. And within the Academy, geographers could host and foster transdisciplinary approaches to research, ultimately framed in ways which highlight interactions between human and bio-physical aspects of environmental issues.

And this is what a number of geographers have attempted over the past century and a half. Scholars such as George Perkins Marsh, Elisée Reclus, Jean Brunhes and Pierre Deffontaine, Dudley Stamp, Gilbert White - to mention but a few - have sought to evoke broader perspectives on humanity and environment. Within the broader horizon of global scientific concern, one could recall that credit for international programmes such as those of MAB, SCOPE, UNEP, IGBP and IHDP belongs to a few dedicated geographers who believed in “bottom-up” versus “top-down” approaches to planning, in the empowerment of indigenous peoples, and in cross-cultural as well as cross-disciplinary collaboration. Many of these schemes - which now enlist scholars from a wide array of disciplines from geophysics to metaphysics, economics to ethics - have been initiated by geographers. Our role has been that of evoking awareness and charting new courses for other, more specialised specialists, to follow.

Such a role, at once poetic and entrepreneurial, will remain one of geography's most important roles among scholarly fields during the Third Millenium. Recent concerns about sustainable development have revalidated classical concepts of scale and appropriateness (Buttimer, 2001). Young scholars in all fields of social science today can approach their subjects with better awareness of their intellectual heritage, of the strengths and limitations of various models which enjoyed vogue for other settings. They are keenly aware that models inherited from a previous generation may have limited appropriateness for elucidating the lived geographical realities of today or tomorrow. So the future beckons invention as well as inventory, debate and dialogue as well as denunciation, and invites richer harvests from reflections on historical experience in the form of fresh insight and energy to elucidate the emerging social realities of this new millenium.

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