

THE CULTURAL TURN IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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Introduction

A deep mutation occurred in human geography during the last twenty or thirty years. It resulted from the transformations of the World, globalization and the appearance of ecological threats at the planetary scale. It was also an outcome of the evolution of ideas. People speaks frequently, in this domain, of a "cultural turn". The aim of the Conference held in Gorizia on 18-19-20 September 2003, and organized by the University of Trieste under the patronage of the IGU Commission on the Cultural Approach in Geography, was to propose an assessment of human geography as it is practiced today, and to measure the role of the "cultural turn" in the ongoing transformations. We are glad to present here the communications given during this Conference.

In order to understand the present dynamics, we have to compare the ideas which were prevalent in the discipline a generation ago and those which are dominant today.

Until the 70s, geographers worked essentially on geographical facts, i. e. realities which could be directly observed. To explain them, they relied on a few models of causation.

In the naturalist perspective which prevailed at the end of the 19th century, the causal model geography used was of the linear type: a fact observed at a given time resulted from a force working at a previous one. The mediterranean climate explained the area where olive trees could grow. Desert was responsible for the development of nomadism.

In the first half of the 20th century, geographers developed a set of new methods in order to bring to the fore the spatial distributions they considered as geographical facts when starting from crude data. They explained them through more complex models of causal relations:

1. They had got conscious of the existence of geographical structures sometimes characterized by a striking stability: regional divisions, agrarian landscapes or humanized environments, for instance. They showed that these structures resulted from the action of a plurality of past and interacting forces.
2. In order to interpret the structures they observed, geographers relied later, from the 50s, on the idea of systems: the realities they analyzed were made of sets of elements between which interactions were numerous and integrated many feed backs : causes and effects were then simultaneous.
3. It might happen that causal relations were in some manner inverted: in order, for a dispersed population, to enjoy a satisfying access to services, it had to be integrated into a hierarchy of central places, of cities. This was a functional interpretation.

Geography as developed until the mid 70s has got free from the environmentalist approaches which had been fashionable in the 1880s or 1890s. It proposed more complex and flexible modes of explanation. The naturalist geographies of 1900 and the structuralist, systemist or functionalist geographies of the 50s, 60s and 70s shared a common foundation: their aim was to analyze an objectively given reality : they dealt with geographical facts. Geographers preferred not to explore what happened in the mind of those they studied. As a result, the narratives they wrote were cold and impersonal; they did not show the life of the analyzed populations, nor their diversity.

The cultural turn, which started in the 70s and gathered full momentum in the 90s, relied on an enlarged vision of the forms of causality working in the world : what we discover around us, see and live, does not result only from past or present forms of causality; it reflects the way people dreams their future. The world we observe has been built out of human decisions. People try to shape the environments they live in according to their aspirations : they do not accept it passively. This is the fundamental idea of the cultural approach. Culture

* First and second parts of this work were edited by Paul Claval; fifth and eighth parts by Maria Paola Pagnini; third, fourth, sixth and seventh parts by Maurizio Scaini. Furthermore, special thanks go to Sargis Ghazaryan for his cooperation. Authors are responsible for the contents of their contributions.

is made at the same time of inherited practices, know-hows and knowledge, and plans for the future. It links present time with what came before and will follow : in this way, it gives a meaning to the life of individuals and groups.

The cultural approach relies on another conception of time : for it, past and present forces are not the only ones to play a role; the aims individuals and groups develop for the future contribute to its shaping. A new type of causal relation is century lived. It has only a relative value. Research has to turn critical: it can only be relied on when it shows the nature, origin and presuppositions of the categories it uses and the preconceptions of the culture in which it develops.

The World geographers are discovering is a construction of the human mind: when they speak about Orient, Far East or Balkans, they do not designate entities which should exist from time immemorial and impose from a long time upon the observers. The units cut up into reality are always loaded with subjectivity; actions which occur in a place are always at least partly explained by the dreams men nurture there.

The cultural turn rubs out the more or less watertight divisions which had been progressively carved up into the discipline. It appears now impossible to consider cultural geography as a mere inventory of the techniques inherited from the past and the languages used in the World. It appears as the first step of all the questions about the realities geographers try to grasp. It follows the trajectories of individuals and shows how they are socialized through the people they come across and the discourses they listen to. The cultural approach discloses that space is not the neutral and objective reality scholars tried in the thus considered and appears as an addition to the already explored ones.

The projects and plans individuals nurture exist obviously only in the present. They are expressed through the representations people build about their future, the images they draw and the discourses they delivered on it.

As a result, geographers learn to take into account the words, mental maps and iconography used by the people they study. Geography discovers the role of narratives and images.

The cultural turn leads in this way geographers to break definitively with positivism. They do not hesitate any more in dealing with the subjectivity of individuals, the vernacular knowledge they are bearers of and their lived experience. Human geography ceases to appear as a juxtaposition of separate fields : economic, social, political, cultural, urban, rural, etc geographies. The realities it explores are not objectively given to women and men: economics, politics, culture, society are categories built by human beings and culturally defined. There are useful for action, but did not exist in nature. The division of geography into economic, social, political, etc geographies reflects the values and biases of the societies in which scholars of the first half of the 20th past to analyze. Its nature changes according to places, profane here, sacred a little further. It is through the analysis of the other Worlds individuals have learnt to build that the genesis of areas loaded with sacredness has to be explained. It is the study of these other Worlds and the horizons of expectancy people elaborate thanks to their contacts which explains how the future is thought and weighs upon the made up decisions.

The cultural approach transforms all the domains explored by the discipline and makes them closer: it is by now impossible to ignore that consumption is culturally constructed, and modes of production express at the time the techniques which have been mobilized and the prevalent systems of values and social organization. It is by now impossible to consider States only as spaces objectively given: the lessons of Jean Gottmann on the role of iconographies are at last understood. At the same time, the analysis of the ways power is used stresses the role of attitudes, expectancies and habits of the populations it concerns, as it is shown by the recent researches on governance. Social geography has ceased to be equated with the mapping of classes always reflecting more or less the economic organization of societies. It explores all the forms and manifestations of sociability and is interested in the way values, religions and ideologies bear out the institutionalized forms of relations. In the field of urban and rural studies, the morphological and functional perspectives which had for long prevailed are superseded by an exploration of the way places and space are interpreted, lived, valued and

preserved. Environmental studies cease to consider nature and landscape as purely objective elements: they take into account their subjective dimension.

The communications gathered in this volume answer one or the other of the following questions:

What is the nature of the new perspectives which have deeply transformed human geography since thirty years? Was the taking into consideration of cultural causality the most significant innovation? Were there others?

- Have the perspectives adopted by research in the fields of geography changed during the last generation? Is the interest for the analysis of representations, discourses, iconography and the study of the plans and dreams of individuals greater? Is more attention given to the legal context of action and the influence of institutions, rules, laws and customs?
- Are these new orientations those which best express the impact of the cultural turn? What are the other factors of the agglomeration of geography which seem significant?

What are the most significant innovations in the different fields of the discipline: social, economic, political, economic, rural, urban geographies, tourism, etc.?

What are the fields which come out of the cultural turn? What is their role?

- What is the significance of the modern studies on mobility and communication? What is the impact of rapid transportation? What is that of modern telecommunications, television, web? What is the contribution of these transformations to the process of globalization, the transformation of human settlements, the growing role of urban areas and big metropolises? What light do they shed on the evolution of tourism and leisure?
- The increasing mobility multiplies contact situations and multicultural areas: how this evolution does affect the traditional forms of culture? Is it a significant factor in the rise of new forms of tensions? Are there means for checking and controlling them?
- The increasing mobility transforms the conditions and ways individuals build their horizons of expectancy. What are the effects of this change on economic development and intercultural relations?
- Up to what point studies on place and territory are just substitutes to those on region? What novelty do they bring in?
- What is the significance of the studies on identities, which were almost completely absent thirty years ago? What is their role in political geography? regional geography? For what reason globalization did bring identity problems to the fore in political and social debates?
- What is the contribution of studies on the building of beyonds to the understanding of religious and ideological phenomena? How do they shed light on the facts of sacralization of space, power and social statuses?
- For what reason the significance of religions and ideologies appear greater than in the past? How to explain the proliferation of sects and the rise of new ideologies, ecologism or multiculturalism?
- What is the significance of landscape studies today? How have they changed during the last generation? What are the new orientations they offer?

