

SOME CULTURAL TENDENCIES BEHIND CONTEMPORARY GEOGRAPHICAL THINKING

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1. Introduction

In the case of geography the cultural turn can be understood in three ways and we will define it in terms of three types of cases:

1. Varying emphases in the research and study of cultural geographical subjects.
2. A new general trend affecting not only cultural geography but also geographical thinking as a whole and
3. A change in the overall intellectual attitude of geographers.

In this paper we shall limit ourselves to analyzing certain tendencies in geographical thinking that are a part of the cultural turn, highlighting - in the second case - what is happening today. This turn can be understood as described by Bergson in "L'Evolution Créatrice" (Bergson, 1907; Wright, 1947) when he attributed the idea of "becoming" to qualitative, evolutionary or extensive movement. The revaluation of what is qualitative would be a welcome alternative to the unbridled cult of the quantitative that has governed the last decades. Or, as Sorokin called it, to the "quantophrenia" to which geography has been no exception (Sorokin, 1964).

The evolutionary movement is to be noted when we contrast the normal interest that has always been manifested in the diverse processes of change on the face of the Earth with the accent now laid on the idea of ecological catastrophe. And finally the extensive movement might be considered as a more interactive and global vision of the Earth, going beyond the limits of traditional geography. Cultural tendencies are those that affect what is geographical *in toto*, in all its branches. These include geosophy, the purely sociological approach, an ideological approach and globalization - that we shall now proceed to analyze one by one.

2. Geosophy

Geosophy consists of an existentialist vision of geography, according to the definition of J.K.Wright (1945, p.1-5). It is a vision particularly centered not only on the perception of landscape, but also on other phenomena that occur on the surface of the earth. It is, therefore, necessarily dominated by the psychological complexities of the relation of man to his environment.

Throughout a lengthy century, a geography impregnated with an excessively scientific approach led to a distrust of all that was not considered to be objective knowledge, discarding it as irrelevant. But, little by little, as a result of the indirect influence of psychology and a more intense knowledge of reality, more profound ideas came to be admitted as valid. Thus findings based on intuition or the threshold of perception began to be taken into consideration, largely as a result of the study of primitive cultures, which made it obvious that "civilized" man is less endowed with vital reflexes. We can also find in the chronicles of antiquity the attitude of the spontaneous observer; for example in Strabo, far from all rationalist influence, where spontaneous judgement is fully reflected. Or else in Ptolemy of whom Van Paasen writes: "*the naive, uncritical way in which, sporadically it is true, curiosities found in tales of travel are taken over*" (1957).

Democritus is possibly the major pre-Socratic philosopher of nature, (in connection with whom there is much we could say on this question of perception and knowledge). Louis Pauwels - and he is sometimes right - affirms that: "*his arguments were not those that we use to-day, but they were both subtle and elegant, based on daily living. And his conclusions were fundamentally correct*" (1980).

On the other hand, we had to reach the end of the XX century to recognize, as René Guenon (1969) has said, that there are types of knowledge that are not "*a question of erudition*" and "*that cannot be learned in any way from the reading of books*".

Without pretending that the only valid knowledge is based on initiation, the esoteric, or is manifested as in the cave of Plato where the shadows are only visible thanks to the light, it is worth while remembering Saint Paul when in Corinthians XIII, 12, he contrasts what we may now know of God with what we shall find in Heaven "face to face": direct perception, intuitive knowledge.

What are we trying to say? Simply that there is another way of knowing objects than the scientific, experimental one. There exists a metaphysical knowledge, in the sense that Bergson understood it as a science (sic) of the real in itself, to which access is afforded by intuition.

We are not in any way supporting here the occult, magic or purely imaginative theories that now invade geography from the field of philosophical pantheism, or that of "mother-earth", leading the way to Teilhard de Chardin or Lovelock. As says Yves Galifret (1965): "*it is necessary to distinguish clearly between reality and mystery. In the first case, evidence predominates and in the second, pure hypothesis. Imagination is not opposed to science except when it pretends to supplant it. The worst consists of converting it into an efficient end when, at best, it can only be a means*".

A perception of the fantastic, of the extraordinary or of the infinitely subtle that is not recorded by any measuring apparatus and if it is recorded is not definitive, may nevertheless unexpectedly turn out to help an investigation. Such was the case with serendipity, where the unexpected and unsought after turned out to be the pathway to achievement.

In all cases it is advisable to avoid confusing the two levels: that of methodical reasoning and that of instantaneous imagination. They both need to be tested to see if they are compatible. The fact that there are other technological alternatives apart from the leading *high tech* ones would also suggest that there exists an alternative type of scientific knowledge. A model personality for this view is Rudolf Steiner, who presumed that his effective discoveries in the field of biology (fertilizers that do not destroy the soil) and in medicine (the use of metals to modify metabolism) derived from theosophical or purely magic neo-pagan doctrines.

All of this is particularly relevant to geography when it is a case of landscape, something that was undeniably rediscovered during the XX century with the pioneer work of Carl Sauer (1925).

Incidentally, a distinguished British town planner, Percy E.A. Johnson Marshall, once heard his colleagues scientifically arguing as to what should be the defining terms of reference for limiting a physical-planning region designed to protect the outskirts of Edinburgh. He then opted for no less than the unexpected definition of *eye sore* (what is damaging to vision - and also a pun on *I saw!*). With this phrase he distinguished the landscape worthy of preservation from what he considered to be irremediably lost. He was referring in the second case to what the Germans call *raublandschaft* (a landscape that has been ransacked or looted).

Although the objective analytical process that takes into account data such as land eroded by wind or water, irrecoverable waste dumps, irrational deforestation, obsolete and anti-aesthetic structures cannot be ignored, nevertheless, the *eye sore* method, eminently intuitive and sensitive as it is, has proved to be as accurate as it is ineffable - and provides a speedy short cut to the same conclusions as those reached by a rigorously rational method.

It is also necessary to recognize that there are landscapes it is hard to read at first sight and whose systematic description does not fully define them. There are cases in which we should be forced to turn to the concept of *gestalt*, an expression that is untranslatable out of the psychological context, where, as is the case of human faces, a simple list of features would not lead to identification. Thus the technique of the *identikit* can only be applied by trial and error; all of which confirms the thesis that the whole - be it in the case of human faces or of the geographical *faces* that conform the landscape is more than the sum of the parts.

It is perhaps superfluous to say there are multiple indirect factors that complement the visualization of landscape - such as narrative literature, legends, poems - or the chronicles of explorers, mountaineers and native inhabitants. All of these elements help to refine the *habitus* of contemplation, a searching inquiry into the mysterious (all that is not evident *de visu*) and the discovery that what appears before us is symbolic, ever containing hidden significance.

But to accede to these paths a certain dose of *sympathy* is required - attraction to the connatural, as defined by Saint Thomas Aquinas, a dose of affectivity that facilitates the

opening up of the visual reception process, without which it is impossible to end up by really knowing a landscape. As Saint Augustine once said of man, but is equally applicable, by analogy, to landscape: *nemo nisi per amicitiam cognoscitur* (it is necessary to establish friendship to understand him). All of which supports the idea of the importance of the point of view and the identity of the observer vis-à-vis the object.

Saint Augustine refers to another aspect that stresses the importance of the subjective factor in *De Catequizante Rudibus* when he speaks "...of what happens to us when we show visitors imposing cities and panoramas long familiar to us. Our pleasure is renewed with the novelty of theirs..." (Obras, 12,15).

Seeing the same *thing through other eyes*, we discover nuances that we never saw the first time round or as a result of our customary routine.

On the other hand, surrounded by the popular culture of the *homo videns* (Sartori, 1997). where we are swamped with images owing to our abusive use of television, our perception suffers a major interference a priori, as when a child *discovers* the elephant at the zoo long after he has read about him in a children's story book N. Whitehead (1932). And in this sense, the teaching of geography implies a two-edged weapon, for uncontrolled subjectivity can be a help but also a deviation from the real objective.

3. The sociological bias

In the world of today the social element eclipses the personal, the individual who used to be the main center of interest. That the collective view prevails in the analysis of all human activities is today beyond discussion. It is not surprising that this tendency has affected geography and has even led to an artificial dialectic between human and social geography.

But there are other factors, also, that enable us to talk of the sociological derivation, when the social becomes the subject and the geographical the predicate. So we should not be too surprised that many research fellows become drawn to the social derivation path. They finally end up in a *reductionism* with all things centering on *la question sociale* - the class struggle or *la Bête sociale* as Simone Weil liked to call it - apart from their then proceeding to abandon all that is specifically geography.

A patent example of this is to be seen in the case of urban geography. The cities of today are a seedbed of social problems owing to the increasing diversity of their functions and the density of their inhabitants. This is so to such an extent that even town planners - those who have the job of ordering urban space - become submerged in conflicts rent with an ideological connotation instead of proceeding to solve spatial issues in the light of common sense. In this way town planning loses in terms of its character as a professional job to be done and as a university training to become diluted into the so-called urban studies.

The first country to privilege the growing sociological approach to urbanism was the United States, where they converted into a hyperbole what was originally a valuable contribution: the urban ecology of the school of Chicago. Thus post-graduate degrees were granted to students who had graduated in economy, law, or social sciences, but had never been taught to read a plan or a map and lacked the spatial sense so indispensable to the exercise of the profession of town planner. Undoubtedly the borderline between auxiliary problems and geography *per se* is not always clear. For example, at a recent symposium on the geography of religions¹ papers were presented that were presumed to belong to the field of geography because they alluded to such things as sanctuaries, (which obviously have a geographical location), the religions of immigrants (people coming from other lands), or the conflicts between imported sects -from other regions - and the religion of the country concerned. But in these cases, and many others that could also be invoked, the researchers usually follow the line of least resistance and end up submerged in social problems, easier and more obvious to deal with, rather than concentrating on the geographical content involved.

An exception to this have been, for example, the studies of Gaston Bardet on urban sociology - that he placed under the heading of socio-topography, or the surveys of Father Lebreton, strictly geographical in character and never distracted by ideological issues. More

¹ Universidad Católica De Santa Fe, International Colloquium, Geografía De Las Religiones, Santa Fe, Argentina, 1999.

recently geography, largely owing to computer facilities - the GIS - has been seen to deal particularly with the purely formal aspects of distribution, rather than those of geographical content which concentrate on a deeper interaction between man and the environment. And this is equally true of the interest in processes of dissemination, as though the Earth were an abstract plane on which social phenomena can be verified.

Where the cultural turn in geography, in so far as it is dominated by sociology, is particularly evident is in the field of tuition. There it is gradually losing its character as an independent subject by becoming submerged in an area of social problems - while forfeiting its function as a bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities.

"To integrate geography into wider areas of knowledge is an absurd idea, as though geography were not already, in itself, an area of knowledge", writes a professor (Pickenhayan). In 1992, the Commission on Education of the IGU found it necessary to formulate an "International Declaration on Education in Geography" in which special emphasis was laid on the fact that "*Geography should be considered a leading subject both in primary and secondary schools*".

Why should such a statement be necessary if geography was not being diluted by the social sciences, particularly under the aegis of the sociologists? Or otherwise taken over by the environmental problem, reaching a point where people talk about "environmental geography" with a markedly critical bias, rather than in a spirit of objective analysis, as though this were something new. The idea, in many cases, seems to be to try and stimulate the interest of the students. This might be acceptable as a teaching recourse if it did not lead to the study of a science based exclusively on questionnaires, inexorably concealing what is essential to the benefit of what is contingent.

Proof of the advance of the sociological influence is that statistics, based on surveys, prevail over maps in the teaching textbooks. This facilitates an a-spatial and even abstract conception, manifested in the ideological approach we have already mentioned and the globalization that we shall be dealing with later.

To summarize, this is the de-territorialization (devaluation of the concept of territory) that we have dealt with *in extenso* elsewhere; an idea that wins people over with the simplistic argument that "territory has a more vulnerable value than capital, work or know-how". And so, in the last resort, as we are now living in the times of the "global village", territory is no longer fashionable (Randle, 1999).

4. The ideological approach

Geography has always been a sounding box for fashionable philosophical trends, visible or invisible, Cartesian, mechanistic, determinist or materialist – as in the case of Marxist geography. The positivism of Reclus has left its mark and more recently, we would repeat, there is that of Bergson and then later comes Existentialism. In this last case the distinction between subject and object is downgraded and even the knowledge of reality appears to be subject to vital experiences.

To a lesser extent, owing to their more limited philosophical dimension, a correlation can be established between systems of thinking and the so-called "General Theory of Systems" of von Bertalanffy or with the structuralism of Levy Strauss. However, as Paul Claval (1998) has rightly said, these influences "are no longer fashionable, possibly because many of them have been superficial, merely a passing fad. And, finally, the theory of the catastrophe or those of chaos have been used to render banal simple causality. We also note a certain concomitance between analytical philosophy and neo-positivism – with their obviously mathematical basis - and location analysis or other types of quantitative geography.

However, it is one thing to say that ideas have always inspired geography (or rather, geographers) and another to detect the influence of ideologies, or rather speculations, unrelated to what is real, that soon become fossilized. For an ideology implies a commitment to a rigid formula and an exaggerated wish to impose the prevailing philosophy, preferring to persuade rather than to demonstrate.

The ideological discourse that expresses the beliefs and opinions of a given group constitutes, implicitly or explicitly, a call to action to try and impose these convictions; something that we have seen introduced into geography over the last decades. Radical

geography is an extreme, an *altogether* example of the ideological approach, although a more subtle case is the so-called *green house effect*, now converted into an ideology. Not devoid of scientific arguments, it has been easily converted into a *doomsday* vision with the corresponding denunciation, and has not hesitated to invoke false arguments when required.

This all began when some geographers alleged that geography could not be separated from the praxis, and hence it was inconceivable that it should not be involved in the definition of values. All previous geography was loosely described as positivist with a subliminal message to the effect that it had been an accomplice of social injustice. And thus the geography of conflicts was born with the risk (or deliberate intention) of exacerbating them and even of creating such conflicts where they did not already exist. That this was an ideological derivation rather than any true contribution to the treasures of geography is shown by the fact that no one would dream of reproaching nuclear physicists for not having incorporated into their scientific approach the consequences of the atomic bomb.

All of this is the tip of the rationalist ideological iceberg. And at the other extreme we find an irrational ideological approach. It is not perhaps too far-fetched to imagine that in the near future the cultural turn in geography will also come to incorporate an esoteric element, now currently so fashionable throughout the world.

Cultural geography provides a real hoard of information for research on this issue, granted that in ancient civilizations such as those of China all spatial references had a religious significance, especially where it was a case of orientation (Boyd, 1966). And in ancient Greece², the site itself was viewed as sacred long before the construction of the temple. In China the Taoist religion preached the veneration of nature and its contemplation, creating a world of mysticism around the cardinal points. In ancient Greece a religious significance was attributed to the outline of the hills and the siting of the temples was conditioned by the interpretation of the landscape, dominated by the sense of the sacred. Each temple made use of the elements in the landscape, such as an enclosed valley that would serve as a natural *megaron*, as described by Scully, or a conical hill to be a cardinal point or Twin Peaks an axis.

Mount Olympus, where no temple was required to be built for it to be considered a sanctuary, constitutes the clearest example of the relationship between religion and topography. Apart from this, all primitive cultures, including Rome, have privileged the notion of Nature as “Mother Earth” (*tellus mater*) attributing to it the role of fertility in all senses. Modernity, and with it the development of geography as a science, rejected these approaches centering all explanation on reason, but falling into an almost one-way rationalism that excluded any other consideration. And as a reaction to this view, the XX century witnessed the development of a tendency to discover the subjective factor that always modifies, if not entirely, our view of geographical reality.

This in turn has led to a tendency to render sacred things that are in no way numinous, but are simply separated from what is ordinary by being exceptional. Such is the case of a sporting ace, a diva, or an extraordinary site that may all end up by being conceded supernatural characteristics just because they are out of the ordinary³.

We have already said it is not surprising that this tendency in contemporary culture should have an impact on new geographical trends. Were there not already suggestive articles along these lines in the magazine “Janus” in the ‘60s and before that in “Planete”? And although this may have been merely a passing phase, it is not unforeseeable that it may break out again since the ecological approach, based on so-called “scientific” hypotheses, is now reverting to new types of primitive animism. This is particularly clear in the work of James Lovelock (1979; 1988), with his hypothesis *Gaia* in which he considers the planet as an organic whole. His is a globalistic vision in physical terms that does not fail to have certain links with the politically globalist outlook, something we shall now look into it in more detail.

The search for an alternative approach to the purely scientific has led to the demonstration that what is rational does not cover all the field of geographical description, and this is undoubtedly to a certain extent understandable. Nevertheless, the fact that there are certain

² Scully V., 1962. Cfr. In Particular Chapter 1; “Landscape And Sanctuary”.

³ As a result of an artificially induced selection process, a place has been chosen in the hills of Córdoba, Argentina – El Urritorco – with special powers attributed to it - And The Corresponding Tourist Success.

indefinable, ineffable characteristics in the landscape could lead to an attitude of reverent silence, and not necessarily to the prevailing temptation that falls into what Rudolf Otto (1925) describes as “extreme verbose mysticism”; what we would describe as a charlatan attitude.

In Nature there are elements that are totally inaccessible to understanding in terms of concepts (as is true in a different field of what is beautiful). Which means that they cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of the traditional geographical descriptive process of a systematic character. A mountain may inspire an overwhelming reaction, a plain may suggest infinity, a distant mountain chain may awake our curiosity as to its hidden landscape. But these subjective impressions are in no way opposed to, and do not contradict, irreplaceable objective notions. Apart from their immanent significance, they awaken in us the feeling of the transcendental.

As is always the case with what is sacred, in generic terms it may lead us to a sacralization of the profane, to which we have already alluded. Something along similar lines occurs with values when they are maintained in purely formal terms and are not identified with truth, goodness and beauty.

A geography that is limited to the formal approach comes to classify places – always on a hypothetical basis – in terms of greater or lesser “energy” they may have, with the idea that this energy can be absorbed by human beings for the benefit of holistic health (physical and spiritual). A classical example of such a case is the transfer of a current hydrological concept (where energy is understood as the drainage capacity of the land) to the sphere of arbitrary subjectiveness, something based on fantasy with no scientific basis whatever, or - what is worse - actively opposed to it.

With regard to the gnosis - eclectic doctrines that claim to initiate people into secrets hidden in Nature - this is gaining ground among the intellectuals *à la page* who disseminate a pantheistic vision of the world. Such a view is particularly exploited by the so-called *New Age* now creating a subculture (including a somewhat shaky spirituality). Why should this not also affect an irrational vision of the Earth?

The Earth, seen from this angle, has become just one more planet (the name of the magazine was not chosen by chance) thereby reducing the exclusive protagonism of man and of universal culture in order to dilute them in an interplanetary cosmos, a self-created universe that is a perfect entelechy. And with this view we find Carl Sagan with his cosmic egg or Frijof Capra with his neo-Taoism. It can be argued that none of this has really penetrated the geographical academic environment up to now, which is true. But it is worth while asking two questions: 1) Does it not all have a certain influence on the thinking that we have been discussing? And 2) Did not all of this begin with the Marxist school of geography? In both cases owing to the indifference of the majority.

5. Globalization

The global view of the Earth has been strengthened by its tie-in with economic, social and political trends that, strictly speaking, are not relevant, but have an influence on public opinion. Curiously enough, the opening-up implied by what is global in spatial terms has also been transferred to the time factor, involving other dimensions such as the geological and the biological, all of which leads to an evolutionary interpretation that is not necessarily geographical.

A consideration of the Earth as a living being, apart from its metaphorical nature and the argument as to the genesis of life on this planet with all the scientific interest involved, adds nothing at all to the idea of connectivity, inherent in the geographical view. Even the holistic vision of Nature as an inseparable unit provides nothing new for geography.

Are we not witnessing something similar to the concept of the equivalence of living bodies as postulated by Ratzel when he compared them with national states? And Vidal de la Blache, in agreement with Ritter, when emphasized the unity and interactivity of the earth – with his concept of the *milieu* ? He did not, however, consider it necessary to deal with it undividedly, but rather the contrary “to study separately what nature has put together”.

What is new would appear once again to consist of simply moving away from the principles of classical geography – often out of ignorance – supposing that the new approaches will make a substantial contribution. This is not, however, the case of the *Gaia* of Lovelock

with the “unashamedly teleological idea that the Earth is a super-organism” (Hugget and Robinson, 1996). Granted that this idea is very attractive and cannot be ignored, it should be noted that it is a question of a capricious interpolation of neovitalism, something quite foreign to geographical methodology.

Is it not strange that there should be geographers led astray by those who argue in favor of globalization based on reasons that are more economic or political than of any natural origin? Thus we are those who sustain the metaphor that “the world has grown smaller” or that distances have been cut down and territory is no longer of importance. And those who invoke the false dialectic between natural resources and technology, propagating the equally false idea that geography no longer has the relevance of times past.

We must be on guard against the temptation to devalue objective data, in the case of distances measuring them solely in terms of travel time or the cost of transport, substituting analogical concepts for the facts. Sensorial (and even extra-sensorial) perception may serve as a complement to a rational notion but they can never replace it.

The globalist mentality goes far beyond concrete global realities and often maintains exaggerated ideas as to the impact that globalization can have on geography. It is also dangerous to talk of post-modern geographies as though it were possible to establish limits to modern geography. There is, in fact, only a single geography, with a centuries old history in which it has been principally developed, along with the mainstream from which have sprung all varieties of contemporary geographical thinking. Basically the only post-phenomenon is the fashionable adoption of labels, which seems to reduce everything to a collection of diverse and incoherent tendencies.

Globalization, by postulating the theory of the progressive disappearance of territorial sovereignty, tends to undermine the credibility of geopolitics as it was conceived over most of the XX century. Apart from the fact that there may have been ideological factors leading to a loss of prestige for certain tendencies in geopolitics, it is now necessary for us to reconsider this whole subject. According to Huntington (1996), if not nations, then civilizations are going to clash in the near future, each seeking the domination of space.

Globalization is not a painless process. It involves huge migratory flows, demographic explosions in certain regions and a resistance to mixed blood that aggravates ethnic conflicts, all of which implies an inescapable re-thinking of geopolitics. There would seem to be a real plot against any attempt to revive geopolitics. “This ideology particularly distrusts geopolitics (a science that manipulates geographical realities) and considers that nations and religions are nothing more than visions of the spirit (Yves Lacoste would call them *representations*). The doorways of the French universities therefore remain closed to-day to geopolitics (Chauprade, 2002).

De-territorialization is the most typical effect of the introduction of the ideological approach to geography, a tendency that developed fast towards the end of the XX century. And whether owing to the growing influence of either Marxist or capitalist economic thinking, the effect was the same. In both cases the value of territory is questioned and, as a consequence, the very relevance of the geographic factor is placed at risk.

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