

# Geographic Education in “The Age of Humanities”: Postmodernistic Demands Make It “in” Again

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Ours is the time of a new revival of humanitarian values & of increased importance of “human” angle to sciences, time to revert to concept of education as enlightenment rather than simple accretion of factual knowledge. Emerging “Postmodern” world is one of increasingly recognized & re-affirmed cultural diversity. Already now cultural factors are recognised as major differentiating factors behind divergent development paths of regions & countries. A whole new discipline of “cultural political economy” is emerging (i.e. frequent discussions on “confucian capitalism”). Culture also may well serve as link concept for geography’s eternal topic of man-environment relationships. All the above-said brings Culturally-Biased Human Geography into the focus of geography teaching.

As the skill of cross-cultural dialogue & cultivation of tolerance become basic needs for world’s survival & prosperity, geographic education should become more ambidexterous. It’s already well-developed arm is the teaching of local/national geographies that make one a patriot of particular place & culture. Still, without equally detailed & sympathetic knowledge of other regions & peoples, however distant, one is doomed to grow up into a sort of parochial & narrow-minded cultural fundamentalist. Thus, it’s time to bring World Regional Geography into focus. This also entails the necessity to fight eurocentric biases in world geographies.

The majority of currently dominant world cultures are relatively space-indifferent (or placeless). They are much more concerned with the passing of time (the cult of progress in westernism) than with experiencing places. Dynamic change with concurrent notions of spread of novelties (or innovation) leading to standardization of places has gained upper hand over (enjoying continuity & harmony with one’s milieu). But to people, places mean stability. New space-awareness: desire to tenderly “cultivate” one’s place & strengthen links with it should be used to develop another node of geographic teaching. One’s familiar place & region should become the polygon to teach more “utilitarian” skills of our science: ecology, locational analysis, com-

munity development etc.

All the above-said calls for full-fledged geography curriculums wherein each stage follows logically from previous one & focuses on a different scale & facet of geography. Textbooks should have more exactly defined audiences & grade sequences. One such "modular" sequence will be suggested.

## I. "Postmodern" Demands on Science in the Changing World

The values of "global" society to which a large and expanding part of humankind belongs have been practically exclusively shaped by the development of European thought and global capitalist system since approximately late 18th century and are deeply rooted in cultural heritage of Europe's so-called "New History". The core idea has been that of gradual and irreversible "progress" through ever-growing production of goods and services. Progress meant the furthering of very "instrumental" knowledge, and first of all in the sciences proper rather than in humanities. Sciences largely turned into applied research to be something of a maidservant to industry, a know-how accumulators. The speculation on matters that preoccupied intellectual life earlier, the "eternal" questions of meaning and goals of life, of salvation and God had been by large shelved as impractical and irrational, i.e. irreducible to fundamental laws discovered by flourishing sciences. Newtonian mechanics became the new gospel. Intricate matters of human life that hermeneutics are concerned with were now to be reduced to mechanistic laws, and that's what actually happened with early Darwinism and Marxism to give but two most striking and important cases.

The search for holistic world-view that permeated (& continues to do so) the intellectual life of pre-modern society had been abandoned in favour of exactly opposite mental operation: analysis has been substituted for synthesis. Endless branching into ever more specialized disciplines trying to unearth their own allegedly nomothetic laws (what an irony!) is still largely the rule of the day.

The situation briefly outlined above has started to change around the time of the two world wars that shattered many over-simplified beliefs and general spirit of self-assuredness and self-contentedness of industrial society. Einsteinian physics established the relativity principle in the very spearhead of mechanistic thought in physics deemed to be "mother of science". The ideas of synergetics, i.e. self-organization, explain physical phenomena in terms of uncer-

tainty principle and human behavior and not vice versa. Many tragedies of modern history have assured us that for all the triumphs of technology man remains the ultimate cause & end of progress and the bettering of human souls along the lines of universal principles of ethic is a more pressing & self-evident need than material progress.

All this heralds in as many believe, a new age (or rather cyclical phase) in science and society at large. Already labelled as postmodern age it is truly a cyclical comeback to some values and beliefs previously kept for obsolete and out-fashioned. First of all this means a comeback to human scale in measuring "development", and return to humanitarian values as the key ones in a wide range of human activities: from new industrial construction (ecologic considerations primacy) to international politics. Scandinavian countries give us the sneak preview of such policy shifts with deliberate curbing of industrial growth and redirection of society's effort onto improving national environment, furthering education & cultural diversity in society & helping poor countries abroad.

In science there's a new awareness of the necessity of synthesis to counter-balance prevailing analysis. A new search of holistic worldview based on realization of uncertainty & relativity as the only 'universal' principles ruling the world is on. In education it entails on the one hand the similar drive for interdisciplinary synthesis, and on the second hand the comeback to 'enlightenment principles' as opposed to encyclopaedic accumulation of factual knowledge consisting of adapted versions of respective specialised branches of science. The shaping of "cultured", tolerant, perceptive etc. person is more important than mass production of stereotyped precocious "scientists".

## II. Geography as 'Refuge' of Premodern Scientific Values and Ready Recipient for 'Postmodern' Ones.

As was already said above pre-modernism, modernism and post-modernism are but merely the expressions of cyclical development phases expressed in terms of linear time. My assertion here is that geography has been a latecomer in general drive to modernism in 19th century and preserved many of its 'premodernist' aspects intact as late as quantitative revolution of 1960s. And now this not yet quite forgotten past is suddenly absolutely "in" again! In a sense

geography has practically jumped the stage of mechanistic oversimplification of its subject matter with the worst excesses of militant scientism and can now find itself among the ranks of early starters towards more 'human' postmodern science.

Indeed, already by the late 19th and increasingly so in 20th century our field of science was increasingly looked down upon as a living fossil. Geographers stuck to descriptive methods, to holistic vision of reality, to the search of broad relationships as opposed to rigid laws (all man-environment rhetoric in France & USA), to Ritterian ideas of 'providential' arrangement of space, to broad comparativistics and risky speculations on the unity of human history and geography (and, later, social order). It was also a unique field where the study of nature & society were not divorced, the familiar 'sciences-humanities' gap largely absent.

By the 1950's geography has developed strong enough inferiority complex as to its status of "not quite science" to embark onto quantitative revolution. The latter probably was necessary for the disciplines' maturity as it entailed growing reflexion upon methodology of its own and eventual reassertion of uniqueness. It was, luckily in our opinion, a short stage.

Generally speaking, one can view a geographer is unique culture-traits bearer. By the very nature of our discipline we're keenly aware of diversity and opposed to uniformity, we're tolerant of peoples & cultures unlike our own & pre to perceive them not in terms of hierachic ranking but as equals. Natural advocacy of coexistence as opposed to exclusiveness gives geographers lead in paving the way for a new cosmopolitan era.

In our opinion several attributes of geography as a discipline fit in nicely with the new demands for education as enlightenment. They will be discussed below. A necessary reservation to make is that the main goal of reforming geographic education is to overcome certain lopsidedness of the latter. Opinions expressed below can be seen as just another nostalgic appeal to go back to 'classic' values and approaches. In a sense they are, because future is but well-forgotten past. But reintroduction of classic geography should by no means proceed at the expense of 'modern' geography with its highly necessary practical skills. The two major streams of geographic thinking handsomely compliment each other and should co-exist in school in university curricular.

### III. Towards Re-introduction of Traditional Geographic Paradigms

As ubiquitous industrial technology sweeps across the world and figurative shrinking of the globe occurs the interaction between various places, peoples & cultures grows in geometric proportion. We're turning into a global society. This brings forth the need for strengthening Cultural Component in human geography. In many ways we live in a world of reassertion of cultural diversity where development paths of ostensibly similar industrial societies diverge increasingly in compliance with their cultural foundations (confucian vs. protestant capitalism etc.). A whole new brand of "cultural political economy" has recently developed. Cultural angle also provides educationalists with extremely flexible framework and integrative conceptual centre as culture is a universal interface: between man & environment, society & individual etc.

There's another reason to bring cultural geography into focus as well. Only knowledge & understanding of others cultures unlike one's own allows one to develop a sort of tolerant & cosmopolitan world-view that would counter ever-present threat of parochialism & fundamentalism.

In practical terms this means that geographic education should find a narrow path of compromise between teaching "Domestic" geography of home region and world regional geography. Overemphasis on the former may help turn one into narrow-minded "provincial patriot", overemphasis on the latter into a rootless "citizen of the world". Since the balance now is definitely skewed in favour of "Domestic" geography world regional geography component should be strengthened. The principle of overview for major world cultural realms should be that of equal space allotted to each of them irrespective of territorial proximity to home area or cultural affinity with it. The rationale for such egalitarian treatment is avoidance of biases especially the omnipresent eurocentric bias.

Another task for geographic education is to revive Regional Paradigm. The latter is a two-edged weapon. First it serves the purpose of bridging geography's internal gap between physical & human branches by shifting accent to man-environment topic. The concept of region as complex unity & spatially organized society is very rich in methodological implications allowing it to grow into an integrative

plexus between many school courses as well. Ironically, that's what is happen now as neighbouring social sciences carve out big pieces of geographic subject matter sometimes to its complete annulment. Instead of passive stance of a loser geography should actively try to assume the position of a 'cross roads' discipline: an active integrative core for social sciences as well as missing link between the former and biology, physics and so forth.

Another impetus to geographic education is now provided by apparent reawakening of the sense of place or place-sensitivity that sets in postindustrial (or for that matter-postmodern) societies. 'Modern' culture with its cult of change has been keenly aware of time but indifferent of space, as was well apparent in its space-consuming attitude & worship of mobility. Now the maturing of highly developed society brings in a reconsideration of values not last of them the attachment to place. Populations become more rooted in home regions & communities increasingly make effort to manage their environment at large treating it as one's extended home. This more intimate feeling of space and growing awareness of its intrinsic value gives geography another chance to strengthen its position relative to other disciplines. Local Geography should be developed in a manner where home region is used as a polygon and case study to learn the more "utilitarian" skills of geography, especially community development & environmental protection.

All the above-said calls for a diversified integrated geography curriculum wherein topical and regional focus should shift from year to year. Textbooks are to form a logical sequence aiming at integration of many different geogrpahies of today. Such sequels may be many and disputes as to the best ones are in our opinion fruitless.

One wants to believe that by preserving inner diversity & resurrecting some forgotten values and approaches geography has a bright future. Postmodern age is big time for geography educators — the fact already reflected in the discipline's growing popularity. Let's not miss the opportunities!