

Remapping Geography

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Little that occurs in contemporary academic geography will surprise members of the National Association of Scholars, for a large part of the field has joined the other humanities and social sciences in the bawdy saloon of progressive politics, cultural nihilism, and subjective epistemology. That geographers are in there roistering with the literary critics and women's studiers may surprise those who expect them mainly to be experts in river lengths and major exports, but no one will be surprised by the songs geographers are singing as they clank flagons with other progressive scholars. If you work in the social sciences or humanities, there is an excellent chance that someone is at this moment whistling one of these tunes in the corridor outside your office door.

We'll begin with a description of contemporary cultural geography and close with an analysis. Our description admittedly dwells on striking examples, but these examples are emblematic of pervasive beliefs and attitudes. Not one is fanciful, overdrawn, or anomalous. To cautious readers who object that we may have committed the error of identifying the abuses of an institution with its essence, we respond with this question: where, then, are the protests? Radical politics and cultural subversion are not ubiquitous in cultural geography, but they are abundantly present and more than welcome. Here as elsewhere in the university, the prevalent opinion is that there are no enemies to the left (and no intelligent life to the right).

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This essay may of course be read simply as a depressing report of the spread of a deplorable fad to yet another academic field, but we believe that something more can be learned from the case of cultural geography due to the peculiarities of the field. In our analysis we explain why cultural geography has been so susceptible to cultural nihilism, why its small size has made it an easy conquest for progressive politics, and why its peculiar understanding of interdisciplinary research has been favorable to subjective epistemology.

Cultural Geography Today

Geography is a small, rather strange academic field. Nearly half of the geographers in the United States are “physical” geographers who study landforms, soils, climate, and vegetation. The rest are “human” geographers, most of whom consider themselves social scientists, and a few who consider themselves humanists. “Cultural geography” is the subset of human geography that studies the geography of culture, although within the discipline the meaning of “geography” and “culture” are hotly disputed.

When first undertaken at the turn of the nineteenth century, cultural geography was governed by the doctrine of social Darwinism and sought to explain global cultural diversity as the product of natural selection. It later drifted to the outskirts of cultural anthropology and studied the ways that different cultural groups shape the earth’s surface. Geographers called the product of this shaping “landscape.” Until the late 1970s cultural geographers wrote mostly about landscapes: the shapes of courthouse squares and corncribs, motels and main streets. This harmless, if arguably sometimes pointless activity began to wind down in the 1980s, giving way to the “new cultural geography.”

The new cultural geography “interrogated spatial practices,” “deconstructed nature,” “decoded discourses of domination,” and otherwise gave pretty free rein to the fashionable “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Gone were the courthouse squares and corncribs; arrived were the progressive politics of class, race, sex, and sexuality. Cultural geographers, who had formerly favored tweed jackets and sturdy walking shoes, now shaved their skulls and donned black turtlenecks and jeans. It was—they were—totally tuned in to what was happening in the other social and human sciences.

Much good blew in with the new cultural geography. Culture was no longer seen as a consensus, but rather as a sometimes-fractious dialogue. To

its utilitarian core of economic skills and solidarity were added the larger philosophic and artistic tasks of interpreting and representing the cosmos. These interpretations and representations were understood, at least at first, not as mere emanations from or reinforcements of the utilitarian core, but as autonomous processes with their own logic and end.

But weirdness blew in as well. Before long one could hear a conference paper read by a graduate student who had quit her job as a gym teacher and come out as a lesbian in order to write a dissertation on the “erotics of the locker room,” or by a solemn assistant professor on “the aesthetics of fat wattles on large bodies.”¹

What memorable presentations of this sort shared with the general run of writing in the new cultural geography was the assumption that conventional attitudes are mere prejudices (i.e., groundless, perhaps power-serving beliefs), and that the job of cultural geography is to subvert them. After all, what’s wrong with a gym teacher’s voyeurism? And why should corpulence be considered unattractive? Indeed, is there anything at all to be said for any aesthetic or moral judgment—or are they all a mask of power?

The weirdest papers normally remained largely out of sight in the scholarly sub-basement of conference abstracts, and had as their principal purpose prizing travel money from department heads and deans. But the winds of counter-cultural subversion also blew through the pages of geography journals, and even some textbooks. One celebrated undergraduate textbook, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*, offered itself as “an intervention” in the culture wars, written in the hope of “spurring action” towards “cultural justice.” Author Donald Mitchell, a very highly regarded new cultural geographer, allowed that his “materialist and Marxist” account of culture “comes with its own set of blinkers,” and then gave fair warning that “my goal has been everywhere and always to make those blinkers as *invisible* to the reader as possible.” He did this because, “I want to win.” The

¹The first paper was read to the Society for Philosophy and Geography at Towson University in 2000, a meeting where Smith, incidentally, gave the presidential address. The second was read to a special session at the Association of American Geographers meeting in Chicago in 2006. We are unable to cite the proceedings or published abstracts in which either of these papers are recorded because neither conference published proceedings or abstracts. The AAG does publish abstracts on a CD included with the registration package, but almost all of these (including ours) go, unread, directly into conference hotel wastebaskets. That little or no effort is made to record or preserve conference papers and abstracts is, of course, strong evidence that these papers are not primarily instruments to communicate knowledge, but rather shibboleths to signal membership in a politico-theoretical tribe.

only objection he could imagine to manipulating students in this manner was that “it will certainly strike some as masculinist.”²

Undergraduates, formerly considered to be merely ignorant, were now regarded as duped and mesmerized by a great illusion—an illusion from which cultural geographers, mysteriously immune, must somehow deliver them. It is of course possible that in the classroom professors of cultural geography were timid and benign figures diffidently directing the attention of their students to the global extend of Urdu; but gathered at the bar after a long day discussing locker room erotics and fat wattle aesthetics, many seemed to imagine themselves a Marat, a Bakunin, a Guevara.

This was not an altogether bad thing. Progressive thought is a form of thought, and every university should be able to exhibit a few true believers. But the same can be said of other forms of thought, other beliefs. Shouldn't every university, every field in the human and social sciences also house at least a few professors who think that spontaneous organization is superior to planning (i.e., conservatives), that received opinion has a serious claim on our allegiance (i.e., traditionalists), that reality is both real and in its ultimate ground personal (i.e., theists)? Such forms of thought are no longer frequently found in the university or cultural geography. Whether this is because they are not present or because they are not professed, we do not know. In cultural geography we suspect they have been driven to near extinction by the ferocious intolerance of the now hegemonic new cultural geography.

In the unlikely event that a right-thinking, progressive, new cultural geographer should read the preceding sentence, he will no doubt feel a wave of shocked umbrage at its wild, nay wicked, accusation. “Intolerance! Ferocious intolerance? Nonsense!” And especially rich nonsense, he might add, as it comes from some sort of conservative-traditionalist-crypto-bigot. Without agreeing to this characterization, we in turn would feel a flush of pleasure over such an outburst, for cries of indignant protest are among the surest signs that an arrow has hit home.

That progressives are tolerant, that they smile on diversity: these are great load-bearing myths of the progressive imagination. Five minutes reflection on the meaning of “progress” will show that they represent either a pretense or a delusion. Progress implies a goal, a goal implies a plan, and plans have

²Donald Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), xxi, xv.

no place for people who won't get with the program. Progressivism is not interested in letting things take their natural course (a conservative idea), and it does not allow those who are truly different to go their own way (something traditionalists are rather good at). Indeed, it resembles nothing so much as a community parade in which everyone wears a funny hat but marches in the same direction.

Let us imagine an eager young cultural geographer, not given to funny hats, but embarking on an academic career under the credulous assumption that diversity means, well, diversity. He would at once enter a cloying fug of uniform, smug, and frequently ignorant political opinion—the sort of social verities that were once known as cant. Although we are now aware that one of the many reasons not to make a joke at the expense of homosexuals is that there may be a homosexual in the audience, the insight has not been generalized to a caution against rude humor at the expense of certain other groups. Among cultural geographers, as among many academics, it has not inhibited the easy discharge of pleasantries aimed at Christians, Republicans, or white men who own guns. (Is there a difference?) Surely, almost everyone assumes, *they* are not among *us*. Amid the cozy chuckles, our eager young cultural geographer is strangely silent.

He begins to look around. What about our professional organization, the Association of American Geographers (AAG)? Notice the progressive fee schedule, which is intrusive (how much do *you* earn?) so that officers can practice micro-socialist redistribution of piddling amounts of money. Don't write a letter—it won't be answered. See how, two years ago, the AAG invited the great linguist Noam Chomsky to address a plenary session at our national meeting in Boston; yet not as the man who discovered transformational grammar, but as the celebrated radical propagandist. Don't question an AAG officer; he won't understand your problem. Consider the appeal distributed to AAG members some years ago soliciting signatures to a petition denouncing the Bush administration for “ignoring science” and refusing to sign the Kyoto Accord.³ Then reflect on the fact that the appeal's author, a prominent new cultural geographer, had a few years earlier published a rousing takedown—under the memorable title “For a Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious Scientific Geography”⁴—of precisely the sort of

³The petition can be found at http://www.petitionspot.com/petitions/AAG_Climate_Change/.

⁴Deborah P. Dixon and John Paul Jones III, “Editorial: For a Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious Scientific Geography,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 4 (December 1996): 767–79.

positivist science the Bush administration rejected. Was he worried about global warming? Or was he worried about the Bush administration?

See how just this year the AAG president, a human geographer, in an email encouraged geographers in Texas to write their legislators to protest a pending bill that would circumscribe the ways in which Darwinism is taught in the schools. How odd this is, given that virtually every living human geographer also circumscribes Darwinism, and repudiates geography's Darwinian past, every form of Social Darwinism, and the Malthusian Principle of Population on which the whole Darwinian edifice might be said to rest. Were geographers being asked to speak out for Darwin? Or were geographers being asked to speak out against evangelical politics?

This past April our eager young cultural geographer would have opened his monthly *AAG Newsletter* to an editorial that begins: "President Barack Obama should ask George W. Bush to surrender his passport in the interest of national security."⁵ Were the former president to venture travel abroad, Amy Ross of the University of Georgia suggests, an international tribunal would very likely clap him in the gyves of justice and "provoke a dangerous international incident." Needless to say, Professor Ross is clearly not at all concerned with national security, avoiding international incidents, or preserving the liberty of our former president. She would quite happily clap him in the gyves of justice herself, given half a chance, and is only eager to see that American courts be given the "first shot" at prosecuting Bush for the "criminal violence he has directed." Our geographer would not need to be an admirer of George W. Bush, or a champion of his policies to wonder why the *AAG Newsletter* published such an editorial. *The Nation* or the Daily Kos, to be sure. Historically, the *AAG Newsletter* is where young geographers have gone to read job advertisements, middle-aged geographers to read grant announcements, and old geographers to read obituaries. Yet, who knows? Maybe in today's AAG a call to incarcerate—perhaps to execute—the former president is as prosaic as a job advertisement, a grant announcement, or an obituary.

If the AAG has permitted equivalent non-progressive posturing in its name or under its auspices, it has escaped our notice.

Suppose that our eager young cultural geographer is tolerant, and therefore willing to overlook boorishness and bullying. He still must pass the live-or-die

⁵Amy Ross, op-ed, "Geographies of Justice," *AAG Newsletter*, April 2009, 12, <http://www.ggy.uga.edu/pdf/aag2009AprOped.pdf>.

test of publication in the journals. Although we have found that it is *possible* to publish papers that dissent from the progressive consensus, it is not easy, expeditious, or advisable for someone whose tenure clock is swiftly ticking toward midnight. Our own difficulties may have been due to poor execution, of course; but even after contortions of humility, we doubt our efforts represent the rock bottom of geographic scholarship. The problem would seem to be, as one of us recently learned from a regretful editor, that our conservative arguments are “not compelling.”

But we had not considered them *compelling*, if the word denotes an irresistible demonstration before which all rational beings must bow. Few, if any, arguments in the human and social sciences rise to this epistemological standard, and the consequence is that few, if any, beliefs are *rationally* compulsory. This does not mean that we can never hope to persuade another person, or that we must treat all opinions as equal; but it should prepare us to expect some incorrigible diversity of opinion. That our young scholar will not find much diversity of opinion in geography may be taken as evidence—although not, of course, compelling evidence—that certain beliefs have become *socially* compulsory.

So our eager young cultural geographer faces a choice. He may, of course, don a funny hat, join the parade, and get with the program. He will have to learn a few redneck jokes. He could, alternatively, go undercover and publish innocuous articles on the distribution of barbecue sauces or baseball cards while reading the *New Criterion* under the blankets by flashlight. Or he could drop out; maybe start driving a school bus.

Analysis

In sliding to the left, appointing itself to the task of cultural subversion, and excluding minority opinion, cultural geography resembles other humanities and social sciences, and we may suppose the explanation of these changes is in all cases very much the same. Peculiarities of the field do, however, cast useful light on the way in which geographers squeeze (or are herded) into the crowded saloon of cultural nihilism, progressive politics, and subjective epistemology. Here we attempt to explain why.

From Materialism to Nihilism

Nihilism is arguably at the heart of modernity, and may be the destination to which every one of us is tending, albeit at different speeds and with

different degrees of reluctance. Cultural geography today is thoroughly nihilistic, although the polite name of the doctrine is “anti-essentialism.” What this means is that most cultural geographers deny that, when dealing with things, other people, or ourselves we are in any way constrained by the *nature* of the thing, person, or self. Human desire is constrained (when it is constrained) by nothing but other desires. Thus, according to the nihilist, although there are many things I may not do to you because of what you desire, there is nothing I may not do to you because of what you are. To myself I may do anything I desire. To things I may do anything that does not impair the right of other desiring beings to equal satisfaction of desire.

True nihilism did not reach cultural geography until the 1980s, when it entered as the philosophical operating system behind radical feminism; but cultural geography had been prepared to receive it by nearly a century of scholarship focused on human adaptation to and of the natural environment. Cultural geographers had from the beginning studied human cultures as adaptations to the earth’s diverse physical environments, and were understandably impressed by the almost limitless capability of human groups to adapt and survive on tundra, in desert, or by sea. Because the human species has no definite habitat it was easy to draw the inference that human beings have no definite nature.

Yet cultural geographers were bewitched by a partial truth. Because, as the cultural geographer Carl Sauer wrote in 1940, “the traits of making a living are for us the dominant things to observe,”⁶ cultural geographers understood the property of being human simply as a matter of being a *living* human. Survival was the test, and all who survived were equally human because equally alive. We do not wish to disparage the tremendous resourcefulness humans have shown in the struggle for survival, but observe that culture is a means to human flourishing as well as a means to human survival. A long line of scholarly reflection exists on the entelechy of the human, in which mere survival is necessary but not sufficient to full humanity; but because cultural geographers had no professional acquaintance with this thought, they were, we believe, defenseless against true nihilism.

⁶Carl Sauer, “Foreword to Historical Geography,” presidential address, Association of American Geographers, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, December, 1940, http://www.colorado.edu/geography/giw/sauer-co/1941_fhg/1941_fhg_body.html#*.

When Small Is Not Beautiful

Geography is a small discipline that is further subdivided into a number of very small, virtually autonomous subdisciplines. The Cultural Geography Specialty Group of the AAG presently claims 379 regular members, not all of whom are primarily associated with cultural geography or research active, so we may suppose that the community of cultural geography comprises at most around 300 scholars. We know as a basic axiom of social science that differentiation of function and opinion does not occur in small populations. Ideological differentiation does not occur in small populations because there are not enough individuals to form a viable subculture that insulates its members against pressures to conform to majority opinion. A city will, for instance, exhibit more diversity of opinion than a village because an urban minority, while a minority, is nevertheless large enough to form a viable and insulated network of mutual support and encouragement. The proverbial village atheist, in contrast, enjoys no such network of support and encouragement, and so must either conform, move away, or become an angry crank.

Conservative scholars are, we know, a minority in the university; but the total academic population is sufficiently large that this minority, even if only 10 percent of the total, can form a viable, insulated network of mutual support and encouragement—exactly what the National Association of Scholars is! Some humanities and social sciences are individually large enough to support formal or informal associations of intellectual minorities. The Society of Christian Philosophers is an example. A very small field like cultural geography may possibly be too small to sustain meaningful intellectual diversity. A conservative cultural geographer therefore faces a situation much like that of the village atheist.

The practices of academic publication aggravate the pressure to conform. Because an academic paper is expected to come with citations from “the literature,” expressing an opinion that has not been expressed fairly recently in the publications of one’s immediate research community poses difficulties. If one wishes to advance the proposition that, say, gender is a social construct, finding a precedent for this opinion (and hence a footnote) in the recent literature of almost any subfield will be easy. Because conservative scholars and scholarship are not as plentiful as progressive scholars and scholarship, statements of conservative opinion are comparatively few and far between. A conservative scholar seeking citations must, therefore, reach

further into the past than his progressive counterpart, and more frequently into neighboring disciplines. This is a simple matter of arithmetic, but it makes conservative opinions appear outdated and recondite. We have had papers rejected solely because they fail to “engage the contemporary literature in cultural geography”—a bureaucratic way of saying that they are not thoroughgoing exercises in progressive nihilism.

Rule Is Easy When Rules Are Few

Geographers have long supported the idea of interdisciplinary research, and regarded geography, with its physical, social, and humanistic branches as a sort of interdisciplinary discipline. Being well socialized into the platitudes of our field, we agree with these opinions, but note that “interdisciplinary scholarship” may indicate two rather different forms of scholarly activity. It sometimes indicates collaboration between two or more scholars from different disciplines, and it sometimes indicates the work of an individual scholar who freely crosses back and forth over conventional academic boundaries. A geographer writing a paper on the novels of Thomas Hardy or building an argument around the philosophy of John Paul Sartre are examples of the second kind of interdisciplinary scholarship. This type of scholarship, which might be better described as transdisciplinary, is common in cultural geography and no doubt explains the attraction of the field for a scholar like Jared Diamond.

Since we ourselves are decidedly transdisciplinary, we are not about to condemn the practice, however odd and amateurish it may appear to scholars in disciplines that are, well, more disciplined. But we must acknowledge that it has the consequence of inhibiting development of formal decision procedures. Cultural geographers must of course judge the quality of evidence and arguments—and we believe they often do this as well as scholars in other fields—but their judgments are often highly intuitive. Formal decision procedures develop only when a group routinely makes the same sort of decision using the same sort of evidence. We do not regard cultural geography’s neglect or underdevelopment of such procedures as a failing; it is an unavoidable consequence of the subdiscipline’s transdisciplinary nature. But it, too, has a consequence.

Formal decision procedures, like objective evidence, are the means by which minorities may speak truth to power. If I have a prior commitment to accept the conclusion of all arguments that meet certain formal criteria, I can

be forced to accept substantive conclusions I find distasteful, inconvenient, or costly. So must a discomfited majority, however large it may be. In the absence of formal decision procedures (which is often unavoidable), I can, however, simply announce myself “not persuaded,” and dismiss an unwelcome argument with the vague and unanswerable complaint that it is “not compelling.” The freedom of transdisciplinary research is, therefore, often spurious, since intuitive judgment and subjective epistemology result in a discipline where no thought is rationally compulsory, but many thoughts are socially compulsory.

Conclusion

Contemporary cultural geography is intellectually and politically homogenous. It is also intolerant and exclusionary in the roundabout but effective ways common to many homogenous, intolerant, and exclusionary groups. From the example of cultural geography, conservative scholars can draw at least three useful lessons. (1) A materialist preoccupation with the means of production, whether Darwinian or Marxist, paves the way to nihilism. (2) Intellectual minorities will find small disciplines and subdisciplines especially inhospitable, and can hope to survive only through an interdisciplinary alliance such as the National Association of Scholars. (3) The more informal or intuitive the logic in a discipline or subdiscipline, the more completely majorities will control the conversation.