
Some Thoughts on Geography and Specialization

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Geography is a science relying at least in part upon cooperation with and a considerable degree of dependence upon other sciences, both physical and social, ranging from anthropology to zoology. To the informed public it displays an image of lands and seas, as brilliantly pictured in the *National Geographic*, or perhaps just some kind of knowledge pertaining to the earth. To the scholar in geography, it involves description, interpretation, and correlation of the man-earth phenomena as well as correlation of their distribution patterns. Unfortunately, there seems to be dissatisfaction in rounding out a reason, purpose, or objective in geography, one complete and final. This dissatisfaction is evidenced by the periodic attempt and suggestions by some to change the name of the field to "Regional Science" or a few kindred ones. This also might be evidenced by the attempt of some to make geography a pure cause and effect type of science with multi-variate systems and quantification in the extreme. This, if accomplished, they seem to argue, will succeed in destroying the stigma of "brightly colored photographs of lands and seas" which is, after all, only the layman's view of geography.

Then there is dissatisfaction in the structure, scope, and purpose of geography indicated by the drift toward, even complete dependence, in some cases, upon other disciplines which might ultimately bring about a metamorphosis of geography as a discipline of ultra-specialization.

Perhaps the following parallel will illustrate this particular trend. In geography and medicine, one must become knowledgeable in dept¹

with all the components, forces, objects, functions, and their interrelations in order to fully understand the entire unit or whole. In medicine, the physician must understand the parts, functions, and interrelations of the human body. If specialization follows, a knowledge of the components and interrelations will still be effective for it would be difficult for one to function independently of the other; yet as the tendency of specialization is more in effect than ever in medicine, all efforts of the specialist are eventually directed toward the component of his specialty and he is then qualified to administer only to the malfunction of that component. In geography, essentially the same progression prevails. As the geographer achieves his specialization, he seems eventually to lose contact with the other components of the field and begins the drift toward the other endeavors he is dependent upon for his research data and information, finally attaching to one, thus epitomizing the specialty as the foundation of the field. This approach would then distort the true objective and scope of geography and would serve only to satisfy the end or objective of the specialist. Such a tendency is particularly evident among cultural geographers, but not so evident in the field of physical and biological geography as the laws and limits of the experimental methods of science have been more exacting. While the physical geographer tends to remain within reasonable limits, the cultural geographer feels relatively free to extend beyond the known boundaries or frontiers of geography as the mother of science, and develop a skill or specialty oftentimes difficult to be interwoven into the fabric of geography.

According to Hartshorne (1958), "the unique purpose of geography is to seek comprehension of the variable character of areas in terms of all the interrelated features which together form that variable character." One who might follow this idea would indeed be required to become skilled in all the components of geography, even if he became highly competent in one. The geographer's task of mastering this complex array of interrelated features is not an easy one and the tendency to circumvent this responsibility might result in an extreme specialization.

The purpose of this argument is certainly not to discredit the value or utility of special skills in the area of geography, as it is most effective and necessary if the specialist can make a contribution benefiting the entire field. Perhaps this can best be exemplified by the fact that Thornthwaite, in developing his map of climate, depended rather extensively upon mathematics and physics, without which his contribution would have little or no foundations; yet in his research, he was able to utilize effectively the physical sciences to the satisfaction of geographers, and at the same time, retain his identity as a geographer. The freedom of specialization in geography, to be sure, has an aura of charm, appeal, and challenge to one so long as the freedom is not abused by those who tend to infringe upon and become lost in the outer limits of the classic wheel of geography. This means simply that some are too closely aligned with or entirely dependent upon a pursuit well beyond the rational confines of geography. Such might be illustrated by recent contributions relating to infringements upon architecture, pure economics, mathematics, and other disciplines. The resulting contributions seem to be lacking in quality necessary for adequate incorporation into geography as a unified field. The struggle seems to be one by those who are endeavoring to implant into geography the pure flavor of science in an attempt to directly compete with disciplines more completely regarded as such. This can only be accomplished by sacrificing or eliminating such highly respected areas as regional and historical geography and classifying them only as "assets." The intensive plunge into science is rather unnecessary as geography has already attained adequate respect in the highest academic circles, for the unique reason that no other science endeavors to explain, interpret, or perceive the many components of an interrelated complex that give character to place.

LITERATURE CITED

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