American Geographers in the Year 2000

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I spent the fall of 1969 teaching at the Royal Institute of Technology in Copenhagen, with frequent trips to Washington, DC, Athens, and London. On one of the trips, I was asked to speak at the December meeting of the Institute of British Geographers. I agreed, and a long, grey, wet Danish weekend was devoted to writing “The Geography of the United States in the Year 2000.” Public-policy issues were very much in my mind. On my Washington trips, I was involved with the activities of the National Goals Research Staff in the White House, and I saw a major opportunity for geographers to make a contribution to the discussions on urban, regional, resource, and environmental policy. My sense of the need for futures-oriented thinking and technological forecasting was sharpened by trips to Athens, where I worked on projects with Constantinos Doxiadis and his associates at their Athens Center for Ekistics. And, to stimulate the imagination, Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” was showing at the cinema a block away.

When Daniel Sui called to discuss the possibility of a panel devoted to my paper, I was skeptical, but I finally said, “Go ahead. Make my day.” He did. As I had anticipated, however, the exercise tells us as much about generational differences among geographers as it does about my 1969 paper. Hence my title.

In my paper, I attempted: first, to relate to my British friends and colleagues what I believed to be salient in the economic geography of the United States in 1969; second, to describe the processes of change that I believed were unfolding at the time; and third—and most importantly—to focus on changes in the nature of change that would flow from revolutionary electronic innovations. These, I thought, presaged a new era of telemobility in which geography would be molded by time-space compression and immediacy of communication. Distance would decline as a structuring variable, and environment—including created social environment—would increase. Presaging the “new economic geography,” metropolitan areas would begin to invent their own economic bases. Those at the periphery—particularly the nation’s minorities—would relocate and find their power base in the central cities, while new developments would disperse at two scales, expanding metropolitan peripheries and around the nation’s “rimland,” resulting in inversions of the core-oriented geographies of the 1950s. But I also noted that these forecasts were conditional. Quoting a personal communication from Daniel Bell, “perhaps the most important social change of (the) time (was) the emergence of a process of direct and deliberate contrivance of change itself.” By anticipating change and measuring the course of its direction, we should be able to shape it for predetermined ends. Forecasts, therefore, were not destiny.

It is worth considering the clues I had available in building my forecasts. I had seen and used but was sworn not to discuss Corona imagery. I had just agreed to head off to Indonesia to plan the location of a ground receiving station for the ERTS-1 satellite’s remote sensors (among other things). And I was aware of the gleams in the eyes of folks in the computer and communications industries regarding new forms of telemobility. Some of these gleams are only now coming to term. In 2001, there occurred the first real-time demonstration in which holographs were teleported, in a meeting in two locations 200 miles apart in Texas. The participants on each stage were half in the flesh and half fully dynamic, three-dimensional holograms. Both could maintain eye contact with members of both their local and their distant audiences.

Of course, no technological forecast is immune from exogenous shocks, of which there have been many in the last thirty-five years.
As the Cold War intensified, no one in 1969 thought that it would end so precipitously with the sudden collapse of communism, the triumph of market-based democracies, the hegemony of the United States, and massive transnational movements of capital and labor. Nor would anyone have thought that there might be equally dramatic shifts in geographical thinking.1

The consequences of the shifts in geographical thinking can be seen in the four commentaries on my paper. Stanley Brunn and Donald Janelle, born in 1939 and 1940, received their Ph.D.s in 1966; Edward Malecki, close behind, was born in 1949, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1975. Their evaluations stay close to Sui’s charge, focusing on issues of forecasting growth and change. Barney Warf and Elvin Wyly, born in 1956 and 1966, did not receive their Ph.Ds until 1985 and 1995. They bring to the task the mindset of a younger cohort that has separated itself from the scientific approaches to geography that I value. Neither can resist the temptation to lecture me for my beliefs. Their articles highlight the “old school-new school” contrasts that now divide American geographers.

Brunn and Malecki accurately identify the salient features of my paper, together with some of the endogenous changes and exogenous shocks that changed the nature of change that I foresaw. I join with them in celebrating the expanding geographic literature on electronic technologies and their diffusion, and would quibble with them on only a couple of points. They say that the “principal theme” of my article is that growth patterns are hierarchical, and they say we were all “blindsided” by the Internet. While I did spend time discussing hierarchical growth, I said that this was the dominant pattern of the 1960s, but that if we focused on it we would miss the essence of the American challenge— the compression of time and space and the emergence of new social frameworks that were destined to change the nature of change, driven in large measure by revolutionary electronic innovations. To be sure, I did not foresee the Internet, but I knew of work on network development and that the ARPANET was our means of communication.

Janelle focuses on the nature and difficulties of technological forecasting. I readily agree that such exercises are not for the faint of heart. There is much that is unknowable; our systems are open, not closed. That being said, however, we must imagine what might be if we are to fashion alternative concepts of what should be, and attempt to shape change to achieve our ends. This, of course, implies a commitment not merely to debating alternatives, but also to action. I believe, as I indicated in my concluding paragraph, that it is essential that we keep one foot in theory and the other in practice, not afraid to learn from our mistakes.

Warf focuses less on my paper than on the vision of America and its role in the world that is more comfortable to his generation. Much of his article is devoted to a critical discussion of the consequences of globalization and American hegemony, neither of which was on the radar screens of the 1960s. He argues that my focus on technological and demographic change gives my paper an “antiseptic quality,” in that problems of income inequality and predicaments of the education, health-care, and penal systems are omitted. Far from my 1969 discussion, this then turns into a personal attack on my recent writings, combined with a diatribe against those whose political beliefs are right of center. He asserts that the omission of social issues in my paper “reflects [a] particular ideological view” that he associates with the actions of “a conservative electorate . . . devoid of empathy” that has “led a class war against the poor” and a “new jihad against immigrants, the impoverished, the sick and elderly, and the unskilled.” My, oh my, how little he knows me! He was still in training pants when I was working on bustee housing programs in Calcutta. He had not graduated from high school when I was trying to improve Housing and Urban Development’s first experimental fair-housing programs in Chicago. The real motivation for his outburst comes later, however: I am an “unrepentant defender of the scientific method . . . increasingly surrounded by a sea of postpositivists, a Custer of positivism at the Little Big Horn of social theory.”2 This is hardly a good beginning for the “sustained engagement” for which he calls in which “scientific” geographers and postpositivists explore their differences in
mutually respectful ways that illuminate their contrasting assumptions and lines of reasoning.” Such name-calling is not helpful. It takes us a long way from the technological forecasting exercise I attempted in the 1960s, with its anticipation of some of the consequences of the information technology revolution.

Wyly provides an interesting essay in which he spells out why he believes that what I attempted in 1969 (“one of the rare interludes when it was actually possible to describe the geography of the United States by analyzing the place itself”) is not possible today. He argues that the uneven geographical developments of globalization have swept aside many of the economic and spatial arrangements of the middle decades of the twentieth century; the data systems used to measure and monitor have been privatized, making empirical research more difficult; and the role and conceptualization of space have changed: “Monitoring and intervening in geographical change is now understood in dialectical terms, as space is used alternately to reinforce or challenge prevailing social and political relations.” But he, too, cannot resist the opportunity to castigate me for my belief in the necessity of a scientific geography. To him, dialectics should be the name of the game, leading him to depart from his useful exposition of the changing forces reshaping American geography to assail me for failing to “celebrate[e] the ongoing intellectual resolution of binary oppositions that is the mark of a living tradition,” claiming that “a new generation of master weavers [is moving] beyond the old binaries to create a tapestry of social theory and quantitative analysis.” In one respect, this response pleases me. I am encouraged that my deliberately incendiary editorials in Urban Geography are eliciting a response, beginning a process in which, in Warf’s words, “scientific” geographers and postpositivists explore their differences in . . . ways that illuminate their contrasting assumptions and lines of reasoning.” The dialectics may not be Hegelian, however, and synthesis appears unlikely, as is revealed by Wyly’s statement that “younger geographers [have] conclude[d] that the stables need to be cleaned once again.” All geographers should reflect on this statement and ask who will do the cleaning, what will be removed, what will replace it, and what this presages for the discipline of geography in the United States in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 When I wrote my paper, David Harvey had just published Explanation in Geography (1969), celebrating the emergence of geographical science. But he did a 180° switch when he published Social Justice and the City (1973) amidst antirar conflict and violence. Soon, campus Marxists were decrying science as a tool of capitalist oppression, seeking to formulate solutions to social problems that were dialectically opposed to those advanced within the mainstream. Later, as communism collapsed and it was clear that Marxist solutions had delivered to the proletariat the equality of common poverty while affording party elites all the privileges that flow from absolute power, the dialectics were transformed into cultural theories of postcolonialism. The world’s ills became defined in terms of polarities between the powerful and the powerless, oppressors and victims, rich and poor, white and black, male and female, the West and “the rest.” In the words of Tom Wolfe: “Marxism may be dead and the proletariat . . . proved hopeless . . . But we can find new proletariats . . . women, non-whites . . . homosexuals, transsexuals . . . pornographers, prostitutes . . . which we can now use to express our indignation toward the powers that be” (quoted in Hollander 2002). Antonio Negri weaves this idea into a reinterpretation of Marx’s Grundrisse in which he locates the agents of social revolution among those marginalized from economic and social life (criminals and the under- and unemployed), rather than among the industrial proletariat, which he views as having been co-opted by capitalist wealth and bourgeois freedoms (Hardt and Negri 2001). As a consequence, cohorts entered academia predisposed to labeling all who were unwilling to espouse these ideas as unredeemable right-wing conservatives. The evils of the world were said to be linked to the United States, to capitalism, to positivist thought, and to class exploitation.

These arguments were reinforced in a second wave of change, which was marked by the advent of critical social theory. Emerging as an outgrowth of Marxist dialectics, it provided a way to maintain anticapitalist ideas while avoiding questions of the collapse of communism. Critical social theorists say their intent is to deconstruct the underlying representations of hegemonic research programs by analyzing the inequalities produced by dominant social practices and the research programs used to justify them. As Tim Cresswell (2002, 18) writes in his review of Harvey’s Spaces of Hope:

The world of critical theory I was brought up in (just a bit after the heyday of Marxist geography but when new cultural geographers still called themselves Marxists for lack of a better club to join) has taught me that the highest aspiration of radical, progressive human geography is to
engage in endless critique (more recently and somewhat loosely called deconstruction). Indeed the lesson of much in post-structuralism is that the most radical form of being “critical” is to never allow ourselves to rest in the endless performance of critique. The most important act of all is to make sure we critique ourselves—undermine our own certainties.

Amidst such uncertainties came a third wave, postmodernism, which builds on the notion of difference. To its advocates, the world is subject-centered and socially constructed, knowable only through language and text. Since reality is a construct, objectivity is impossible. All is contingent: the contents of knowledge are dependent upon the social conditions of the knower. Generalization is eschewed because knowledge has no claim to transcend the contingency of cognitive and linguistic structures; it is local and situational. Since all is relative, even logic, mathematics, and science have no validity beyond the contexts of their emergence. With a multiplicity of origins, there must be a multiplicity of truths. Meaning can never be identical to itself. Interpretation and subjectivity must prevail over objectivity and transcendence, and “disciplines” must become big-tent “subjects” in which every worldview is of equal standing.

2 I hesitate to ask him to complete his metaphor. Custer may have lost his scalp, but Sitting Bull became a sideshow feature in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show before he was murdered by a Lakota Sioux, Crazy Horse was shot trying to escape custody, and neither the Sioux nor Cheyenne fared well on their reservations.

**Literature Cited**


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