The Geography of the United States in the Year 2000: Science, Predictability, and Public Policy in an Age of Uncertainty

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The unexpected also should be expected: “catastrophes” in which existing arrangements are transformed and new structures put into place to replace them. A key to understanding is to continually probe the second derivatives: change in the nature of change.

—Berry 1990, 98

In a recent, jointly authored article in The Professional Geographer, three former presidents of the Association of American Geographers urged geographers to address the big questions that can capture the attention of the public, media, and policymakers (Cutter, Golledge, and Graf 2002). Brian J. L. Berry, himself a former AAG president, has set an example for his generation and future ones by asking these big questions, especially in a policy-relevant context. Even back in 1969, the geography of the United States in the year 2000 was occupying Berry’s mind. At that time, he challenged himself and our profession to speculate, in the spirit of H. G. Wells’s (1902) prophetic habit of mind, on some of the most salient changes in American society and their geographical manifestations. In 1970, Berry published an article in the Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, based upon a paper he had delivered at the 1969 Institute of British Geographers (IBG) annual meeting entitled “The Geography of the United States in the Year 2000.” In the article, he reflected on the geographical patterns of the United States in general and the emerging daily urban systems in particular by the year 2000. He anticipated the increasing polarization of the United States into a limited number of growing daily urban systems and the interurban peripheries whose economies and populations would decline. Specifically, Berry concluded that by the year 2000, the transformation of the geography of the United States would precipitate the migration of the poor minority groups from the peripheries to the city cores and a resulting acceleration of the outward movement of upper-income whites from central cities to expanding outer edges of those daily urban systems. The geography of the United States would be inverted by the year 2000. According to Berry, this tendency to inversion—supported by rising real incomes, improved highways, and the search for superior low-density residential amenities—would be further advanced by new electronic technologies, replacing movements of persons by movements of messages. Berry also predicted the arrival of the era of telemobility, in which mechanical environments would be replaced by electronic environments. The era of telemobility would not only push the emerging inversion of American geography into its ultimate dispersed form, but also reduce and eventually eliminate the traditional role of the central business district as the place for face-to-face contacts.

At approximately the same time as Berry published this article, Peter Hall, another geographer/urban planner, conducted a study at a much smaller geographical scale. In the second edition of London 2000, Hall (1969) argued for a new concept of strategic planning for London and its surrounding region. Widely reviewed and acclaimed, Hall’s book had a powerful catalytic effect. Three major official studies followed in quick succession, and together they created a blueprint for precisely the multicentered city-region that Hall had envisaged. Later, Hall even expanded his
studies into the continental scale (Hall 1977). Hall’s future-oriented and policy-relevant work has not only won him the knighthood but also earned him the reputation as a “hero of dissemination” among policy circles (Walker 2002). In contrast, Berry’s Y2K article seems to have received less attention than it deserves, despite the fact that Berry was the most cited geographer from the mid-1960s till the mid-1980s and despite his enormous contributions to policy-related issues in both developed and developing countries.

We are now in 2004. Have Berry’s predictions stood the test of time? How will our current description of the geography of the United States in the year 2000 be different from that made by Berry in 1969? Are we better equipped and prepared to address these big questions than we were thirty years ago? Do we dare to speculate on the geography of the United States in the year 2030, or even 2050? Seeking better answers to these questions motivated me to organize a panel of distinguished geographers during the 2002 AAG annual meeting in Los Angeles. The Forum articles gathered here come from that panel discussion. The goals of this Forum are two-fold: (1) to revisit the predictions made by Berry in light of the social, cultural, and political realities of the year 2000 and afterwards at various scales; and (2) to use Berry’s prophetic piece as a mirror to better reflect the changes in our disciplinary practices and our society at large. Hopefully, this Forum will inspire the next generation of geographers to study and explore future geographies and continually to probe what Berry (1990) called the “second derivatives”: change in the nature of change.

The Forum consists of four individual commentaries plus Berry’s response. Stanley Brunn and Edward Malecki present a synoptic evaluation of Berry’s article. They also address the issues related to technological innovations and their impacts on society in general and their spatial manifestations in particular. Donald Janelle conducts a closer scrutiny of the methodological issues involved in predicting future geographies and of the spatial data infrastructure required for doing a better job of such an undertaking. Barney Warf discusses the changing global context of understanding the geography of the United States in the year 2000 and afterwards, and Elvin Wyly reflects on the changing disciplinary context of practicing geography then (1969) versus now (2004). In his response, Berry clarifies the historical context in which he wrote the paper and shares his insights on the critical issues raised by the five panelists.

As Warf points out, we enjoy the luxury of hindsight today when revisiting Berry’s predictions made in 1969 about the geography of the United States in the year 2000. Instead of biting his fingers, we should instead focus, as our five contributors have demonstrated to a certain extent, on where Berry was pointing. Berry made it crystal clear that geographic research should be more responsive to the needs of public policy and the need to understand the geographies that are most likely to emerge in the future with and without public intervention. Despite their philosophical differences and varied substantive interests, many leading geographers in the 1970s shared Berry’s zeal for addressing public-policy-related issues from geographic perspectives (White 1972; Coppock 1974; Harvey 1974). During the past three decades, Berry has been tirelessly beating the drum to cheer for more policy-relevant studies and predicting the future. In recent years, he (2001, 2003) has been even more upbeat regarding the necessity for human geography to become a Jeffersonian social science. And yet, geography seems to evolve along paths quite different from that Berry envisioned then and champions now (Hoggart 1996; Massey 2001; Dorling and Shaw 2002). Although many geographers have made important contributions to various dimensions of public policies individually, Martin (2001) argues that geographic research as a whole has increasingly become irrelevant in the policy arena. Martin (2002, 643) further contends that “[T]he lack of policy-relevant research and policy influence is in many ways the tip of a much larger iceberg: geography’s inferior standing and profile in the wider academic, educational, and public domains.” Susan Cutter (1988) expressed a similar sentiment at the peak of the Cold War regarding geography’s ineptitude on issues related to nuclear war. Recent efforts to elucidate geographical dimensions of terrorisms are surely to be applauded (Cutter, Richardson, and Wilbanks 2003), but it still remains to be seen whether geographers will make a difference in the current war against terrorism.
I hope this Forum will challenge our profession to think big, to pose challenging questions that are both intellectually exciting and socially relevant. As Berry (1980, 449) so forcefully argued in his AAG presidential address some 20 years ago: “[F]or to be self-respecting professionals deserving the respect of others, we must help shape processes of ‘anticipatory evolution’ that will form the future environments in which we will live and work.” In this age of uncertainty, perhaps more urgently than ever before (Nowotny et al. 2001), geographers need to follow the example set by Brian Berry: getting actively involved in anticipatory evolution that addresses big questions, possibly starting with those issues identified by Cutter, Reginald Golledge, and William Graf (2002).

**Literature Cited**


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